



# OUTPLAYED

## Regaining Strategic Initiative in the Gray Zone

**Project Director**

Nathan P. Freier

**Contributing Authors**

Charles R. Burnett

William J. Cain, Jr.

Christopher D. Compton

Sean M. Hankard

Robert S. Hume

Gary R. Kramlich II

J. Matthew Lissner

Tobin A. Magsig

Daniel E. Mouton

Michael S. Muztafago

James M. Schultze

John F. Troxell

Dennis G. Wille

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**OUTPLAYED:  
REGAINING STRATEGIC INITIATIVE IN THE GRAY ZONE**

*A Report Sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center  
in coordination with  
Joint Staff J-39/Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch*

**Nathan Freier  
Project Director**

**Charles R. Burnett  
William J. Cain, Jr.  
Christopher D. Compton  
Sean M. Hankard  
Robert S. Hume  
Gary R. Kramlich II  
J. Matthew Lissner  
Tobin A. Magsig  
Daniel E. Mouton  
Michael S. Muztafago  
James M. Schultze  
John F. Troxell  
Dennis G. Wille  
Contributing Author**

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## FOREWORD

Sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center and in collaboration with the Joint Staff's Deputy Directorate for Global Operations (Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch), this report examines the emergence of gray zone competition and conflict as important pacers for U.S. defense strategy. The authors argue that gray zone challenges are unique defense-relevant issues sharing three common characteristics—hybridity, menace to defense and military convention, and profound and paralyzing risk-confusion.

This report and its authors offer an important opening venture into a vexing strategic question for senior defense and military leadership on the subject of gray zone threats. Namely, how can the American defense enterprise adjust to an era of relentless revisionist and rejectionist opposition to U.S. power? On the one hand, purposeful U.S. competitors pursue meaningful revision of the U.S.-led status quo through campaign-quality combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression. At the same time, rejectionist forces exploit, free-ride on, or are propelled by the generalized erosion or outright failure of traditional political authority. Both manifest as wicked direct and indirect threats to core U.S. interests. In virtually every case, they also occur in the uncomfortable “gray” conceptual no man’s land between classical conceptions of war and peace.

In response to gray zone competition and conflict, this report suggests that it will be important for U.S. defense strategists to dispense with outdated strategic assumptions about the infallibility of U.S. global position and the rules governing the meaningful maintenance and exercise of power. The authors suggest that the Department of Defense (DoD) should instead recognize that the U.S.-dominated status quo will encounter persistent and unmitigated resistance. Further, the DoD should acknowledge that this broad resistance will often take the form of gray zone competition and conflict. Finally, the DoD should recognize that the gray zone will continue to confound the DoD until it is normalized and more fully accounted for in defense strategy and plans.

According to the authors, the strategic antidote for gray zone challenges is a more activist and adaptive U.S. approach in the areas of policy, strategy, plans, and capabilities. Absent innovation, in this regard, the authors suggest that the United States invites the prospect of irreversible strategic consequences.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
U.S. Army War College Press



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This report is the product of a combined U.S. Army War College (USAWC) faculty-student study team and was chartered in the summer of 2015 at the request of the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. The report is less an isolated reflection of the study team's thoughts on the subject of gray zone challenges and instead more a synthesis of the collective wisdom and best insights of a wide cross-section of national security analysts and stakeholders.

The study team has a number of organizations and individuals to thank for their contributions. First, however, this report would not have been possible without the tremendous support of Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster, U.S. Army, Director, U.S. Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC); Dr. Hriar Cabayan, Chief, Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch, Deputy Directorate for Global Operations, Joint Staff; and Major General William Rapp, U.S. Army, Commandant, USAWC.

The following report features the expertise and experience of all the individuals with whom we met during round table visits, working groups, and engagements over the life of the study effort. The study team endeavored to take in the widest possible range of insights from defense professionals, military officers, and national security analysts engaged in the business of understanding and countering 21st-century threats. We are indebted to all who took the time to contribute.

Among the many important outside voices we heard from over the last 8 months, we would especially like to recognize the time and contributing efforts of the various military staffs, staff officers, and analysts we were fortunate enough to interact with on the road. We consider them the eventual consumers of this study's findings and recommendations. In all cases, they were invaluable sources of constructive insight that made our research that much more relevant.

In particular, we would single out the Joint Staff, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC), U.S. Army Cyber Command and Second Army (ARCYBER), ARCIC, North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Supreme Allied Commander—Transformation (SAC-T), and the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (SCCoE).

Our expert working group was instrumental as well. It included representatives from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), RAND, the Department of the Navy and Navy Staff, the University of Pittsburgh's Matthew B. Ridgway Center for International Security Studies, the Chief of Staff of the Army's Strategic Studies Group, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) Combat Development Command and Small Wars Office, the Joint Staff J7 (Joint Force Development), the Office of the Secretary of Defense—Capabilities Analysis and Program Evaluation (CAPE), NATO SAC-T, ARCIC, and the USAWC Departments of National Security Studies and Command, Leadership, and Management.

In addition to the military headquarters and staff organizations outlined previously, several organizations hosted substantive roundtable discussions with and for our team as well. These organizations included AEI, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Institute for the Study of War, RAND, ARCYBER, and the UK Ministry of Defense Doctrine Concepts Development Centre.

In addition to our external engagements, we were fortunate enough to collaborate with others involved in the deep study of the gray zone/hybrid challenge. The first was a team of cadets in the United States Military Academy's Defense and Strategic Studies program under the direction of Major Nolan Lassiter, U.S. Army and the leadership of Cadet Matthew R. McCormack. Their report *The Hybrid Dilemma: Implications for Ground Forces in Ukraine* provided useful background insights for this study. Additionally, Captain (Promotable) John Chambers, U.S. Army was both a master's degree candidate at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, a study team expert, and a working group participant. The report by Captain Chambers, *Posturing the U.S. Army for Hybrid Gray Zone Threats*, was instrumental as well in assisting the study team frame gray zone issues.

Finally, to ensure our work would resonate at the level necessary to effect the change sought, we invited and were honored to host a group of experienced senior leaders to "stress-test" the report's findings and recommendations. Without the input of U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Generals (Retired) Wallace "Chip" Gregson, Jr. and George Flynn; and U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General (Retired) Christopher Miller; as well as Mr. David Lamm, Deputy Director of Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies; and Dr. Frank Hoffman, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, this report would not have been as fulsome and thorough as we would have hoped. We are indebted to them for their insights.

The substance, findings, and recommendations delivered in this report are the responsibility of the study team alone. Any flaws or errors should be ascribed to the authors. The contributions of individuals and organizations listed earlier do not necessarily indicate their endorsement. We are eternally grateful for all who voluntarily participated in what we believe to be very important work.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### INTO THE NEW GRAY ZONE

U.S. competitors pursuing meaningful revision or rejection of the current U.S.-led status quo are employing a host of hybrid methods to advance and secure interests that are in many cases contrary to those of the United States. These challengers employ unique combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression to incrementally crowd out effective resistance, establish local or regional advantages, and manipulate risk perceptions in their favor.

So far, the United States has not come up with a coherent countervailing approach. It is in this “gray zone”—the awkward and uncomfortable space between traditional conceptions of war and peace—where the United States and its defense enterprise face systemic challenges to U.S. position and authority. As a result, gray zone competition and conflict should be pacers for defense strategy.

### DESCRIBING THE GRAY ZONE

For defense and military strategists, the gray zone is a broad carrier concept for a universe of often-dissimilar strategic challenges. Defense-relevant gray zone threats lie between “classic” war and peace, legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods, universal and conditional norms, order and anarchy; and traditional, irregular, or unconventional means. All gray zone challenges are distinct or unique, yet nonetheless share three common characteristics: hybridity, menace to defense/military convention, and risk-confusion.

First, all gray zone challenges are some hybrid combination of adverse methods and strategic effects. Second, they menace American defense and military convention because they simply do not conform neatly to a linear spectrum of conflict or equally linear military campaign models. Finally, they are profoundly risk-confused; as such, they disrupt strategic risk calculations by presenting a paralyzing choice between action and inaction. The hazards associated with either choice appear to be equally high and unpalatable.

For Department of Defense (DoD) strategists and planners, gray zone competition and conflict persistently complicate military decision-making, deployment models, and force calculations. They often fall outside the defense conceptions of war, yet they can rapidly and unexpectedly fall into them via miscalculation and unintended escalation. In the end, whether emerging via purpose or implication, gray zone challenges increasingly exact warlike consequences on the United States and its partners.

### AN IMPERATIVE TO ADAPT

U.S. defense strategists and planners must dispense with outdated strategic assumptions about the United States, its global position, and the rules that govern the exercise of contemporary power. In fact, the U.S. defense enterprise should rely on three new core assumptions. First, the United States and the U.S.-dominated status quo will encounter persistent, unmitigated resistance. Second, that resistance will take the form of gray

zone competition and conflict. Finally, the gray zone will confound U.S. defense strategists and institutions until it is normalized and more fully accounted for by the DoD.

These assumptions, combined with the gray zone's vexing action-inaction risk dilemma, indicate there is an urgent necessity for U.S. defense adaptation. Without it, the United States introduces itself to enormous strategic risk. The consequences associated with such failure to adapt range from inadvertent escalation to general war, ceding control of U.S. interests, or gradual erosion of meaningful redlines in the face of determined competitors. These risks or losses could occur absent a declared or perceived state of war.

## FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Examining the gray zone challenge through the lens of five archetypes—three state competitors (China, Russia, and Iran), one volatile environment (Middle East and North Africa), and the United States—this study arrived at six core findings and four recommendations. The findings and recommendations are statements of principle. The study team suggests that these principles will provide senior defense leadership with touchstones for deeper examination. The findings and recommendations are broken into two major categories: **policy and strategy**, and **operational plans and military capabilities**. The former provide judgments affecting high-level DoD decision-making, while the latter informs how the U.S. military might consider employing forces and assets.

### POLICY AND STRATEGY

In the area of policy and strategy, this study found that **there is no common perception of the nature, character, or hazard associated with the gray zone or its individual threats and challenges**. Consequently, there are gaps in strategic design, deliberate plans, and defense capabilities as they apply to operating and succeeding in gray zone environments. This study further found that **there is significant asymmetry in risk perceptions between the United States, its partners, and their principal gray zone adversaries and competitors**. The results of this apparent asymmetry of risk-perception are predictable—loss of initiative, ceded control over interests or territory, and a position of general disadvantage in the face of aggressive gray zone competition. Finally, this study discovered that **there is neither an animating grand strategy nor “campaign-like” charter guiding U.S. defense efforts against specific gray zone challenges**. Because of this, U.S. gray zone responses are generally overly reactive, late, and ineffective.

In response to these findings, this study recommends that the **DoD develop a common, compelling, and adaptive strategic picture of the range of gray zone threats and their associated hazards**. This new perspective should adequately assess the current gray zone landscape, the likeliest future trajectory of its constituent threats, and finally, the prospects for sharp deviations from current trends that might trigger a fundamental defense reorientation. It further recommends that the **DoD “lead up” and develop actionable, classified strategic approaches to discrete gray zone challenges and challengers**. Without a coherent approach to reasserting U.S. leadership, the United States risks losing control over the security of its core interests and increasing constraints on its global freedom of action.

## OPERATIONAL PLANS AND MILITARY CAPABILITIES

In the area of operational plans and military capabilities, this study found that **combatant commanders' (CCDR) presumptive future gray zone responsibilities do not align with their current authorities**. Combatant commands (CCMDs) need greater flexibility to adapt to their theater strategic conditions, and must act to gain and maintain the initiative within their areas of responsibility. It further found that **the current U.S./North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) joint phasing model is inadequate to seize and maintain the initiative in the gray zone**. Purposeful gray zone revisionist actors are successfully campaigning and achieving warlike objectives inside the steady state or deterrence phases of the U.S./NATO joint phasing model. Further, contextual forces of rejection are themselves accumulating warlike wins in the absence of a coherent non-linear U.S. approach. Finally, this study concluded that **current U.S. concepts for campaign design, the employment of forces, and the use of force are not well-adapted to persistent gray zone competition and conflict**.

To contend effectively with the implications of these findings, this study recommends the following initiatives. First, **CCDRs should be empowered to "operate" against active gray zone competition and conflict with new capabilities and agile, adaptive models for campaigning**. This implies that CCDRs should possess the requisite responsibility, authority, and tools essential to achieve favorable outcomes that are in their purview. In addition, this study found that the **DoD and the Joint Force should develop and employ new and adaptable concepts, capabilities, and organizational solutions to confront U.S. gray zone challenges**. It recommends a number of specific actions to improve U.S. military performance in the areas of ground and special operations forces (SOF), air and maritime capabilities, cyber capabilities, exercises, and power projection.

## WAY AHEAD—ADAPTATION AND ACTIVISM

Normalizing and accounting for the DoD's burgeoning gray zone challenge relies on the socialization of two important concepts—adaptation and activism. The defense enterprise needs to adapt to how it sees its gray zone challenges; how it charts strategic action against them; and, finally, how it designs, prioritizes, and undertakes that strategic action. All of these require a robust and activist DoD response. To date, the United States favors approaches that are more conservative. This study suggests that continuing such approaches invites substantial and potentially irreversible strategic consequences.



# Foundational Understanding



## I. INTRODUCTION – NO MORE BLACK OR WHITE, ONLY GRAY

“Man’s mind stretched to a new idea never goes back to its original dimensions.”

-Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.<sup>1</sup>

### A NEW THEORY OF THE DEFENSE CASE

There is a tough reality confronting Department of Defense (DoD) leaders of late. The favorable post-Cold War status quo they and the broader national security community have largely defined, cultivated, nurtured, controlled, and come to rely on for the past 25 years faces a fresh set of strategic-level challenges that are neither war nor peace in their most classic definitions. They are not black or white but instead, decidedly gray because they lie in-between. They are between doctrinaire conceptions of war and peace, between legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods, between universal and conditional norms, between order and anarchy, and finally, between traditional and irregular or unconventional means.

Many U.S. competitors have chosen to operate in this space by design. A favorable U.S.-led status quo has, to date, allowed the United States and its partners to dictate the terms and outcomes of both the “black”—open and unambiguous traditional military conflict—and the “white”—routine and peaceful diplomatic and economic relations—scenarios. In order to compete most effectively, many U.S. opponents choose to operate in between. In fact, today the most impactful defense-relevant competition and conflict most frequently occurs in the decidedly gray territory.

This gray zone competition and conflict—lying awkwardly in an uncomfortable conceptual no man’s land for strategists and military planners—will remain a key pacer for U.S. defense calculations well into the foreseeable future. Combating or contending with the gray zone relies on it remaining at the center of contemporary defense dialogue.

Currently, there is no good playbook for operating effectively in the gray zone. Yet, trends in international security and deliberate adversary activity clearly compel urgent and sophisticated U.S. defense adaptation to its unique demands. Without adaptation, the United States introduces itself to strategic risk at the hands of its gray zone adversaries, competitors, and competitive contextual circumstances. The sources of risk could range from inadvertent escalation to general war, ceding control of U.S. interests, or gradual erosion of meaningful redlines in the face of determined competitors. These risks or losses could occur without the existence of a declared or perceived state of war.

#### Strategic Insights – No More Black or White

- The gray zone is a broad carrier concept for a collection of sometimes dissimilar defense-relevant challenges—describe it, don’t define it.
- Gray zone challenges lie between “classic” war and peace, legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods, universal and conditional norms, order and anarchy, and traditional and irregular (or unconventional) means.
- All gray zone challenges have three common characteristics:
  - Hybridity
  - Menace to defense/military convention
  - Risk-confusion
- Each distinct gray zone challenge is a unique, context-dependent security hazard.

While the gray zone and its emerging threats are not always or even commonly defense-specific challenges, building capability for and campaigning effectively in the gray zone are clearly among the DoD's most compelling near- to mid-term defense-relevant demands. As such, designing effective responses to key gray zone challenges should be a high-priority for U.S. strategists and decision-makers in the forthcoming defense review. That is the focus of this study.

## DESCRIBE THE GRAY ZONE; DON'T DEFINE IT

The gray zone is admittedly a broad carrier concept for a collection of sometimes dissimilar defense-relevant challenges. In this regard, statically defining the gray zone may be far less useful to the defense strategy and policy community than simply describing it as it is now and as it likely will be for some time. Three characteristics are common to all gray zone challenges.

The first and most obvious characteristic is their inherent hybridity. At their core, all gray zone challenges are a hybrid combination of adverse methods and strategic effects. Their complexity and ambiguity militate against effective and meaningful U.S./partner counteraction—especially those countervailing actions or responses that ruthlessly adhere to traditional U.S. conceptions of war and peace.<sup>2</sup>

The second common characteristic of all gray zone challenges is their direct, universal menace to American defense and military convention. In short, they simply do not conform neatly to the traditionally linear spectrum of conflict nor to the equally linear American joint military campaign model. Therefore, in a word, they are hard. For an inherently conservative U.S. defense establishment, they are hard to classify, hard to conceptualize, hard to plan against, and therefore, very hard to counter.

The third and final characteristic common to all gray zone challenges is their profound risk-confusion. In short, threats emerging from the gray zone have a decidedly disruptive effect on strategic risk calculations. Often, the risk associated with action and inaction appears to be equally high and unpalatable.

Individually, each distinct gray zone challenge is a unique, context-dependent security hazard. They manifest differently depending on strategic circumstances, the means available to specific opponents, and the degree to which the same opponents control outcomes overall. In short, there is no single template for gray zone challenges or challengers and, therefore, no one silver bullet to combat or counter them effectively. In the end, it is best to describe the gray zone in terms of what it is not than what it is. It is neither the routine peaceful interactions of textbook international relations nor the equally doctrinal challenge of major great power war. Specific challenges in it manifest as tough, complex, and often ambiguous combinations of forces, actors, methods, and effects.

Today, for example, the gray zone includes aggressive high-stakes statecraft of the kind exhibited by revisionist powers like Russia, China, and Iran, where rival states marshal various instruments of influence and intimidation to achieve warlike ends through means and methods falling far short of unambiguous or open provocation and conflict.<sup>3</sup> Rivals pursuing their interests in the gray zone in this manner do so via methods and means that limit their exposure, avoid direct military conflict with the United States, and

exploit their own areas of relative strength or advantage. They generate asymmetries of decision, capability, and risk perception that can stymie effective American responses.

The gray zone also includes the less purposeful and more incidental confluence of destabilizing, competitive forces (e.g., popular disaffection, disintegrating authority, hyper-connectivity, distributed resistance, and proliferating lethality or disruptive potential), and the organic rejectionist movements best positioned to exploit all or some of these forces to their decided advantage. This latter contextual combination of hostile forces in places like the Middle East exploits clear vulnerabilities in the prevailing status quo and presents effective hazards to core U.S. interests across a broad and seemingly indefensible front—all from sources operating well-outside the traditional state system.

## THE “NEW GRAY NORMAL”

Thus, for the near future, broad-spectrum gray zone resistance to U.S. politico-military dominance will emerge from a shifting universe of state and nonstate actors. The “new normal” will witness anti-U.S. resistance unfolding outside the basic “rules” of American defense and foreign policy convention. Consequential antagonists will include but will not be limited to the usual suspects. China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and al Qaeda, for example, have adapted and will complicate the defense of important American interests by maneuvering more often than not in the gray zone. Likewise, new—and perhaps even wholly unfamiliar—security challengers are likely to ultimately avail themselves of the ways and means of effective gray zone resistance as well, and enter a crowded and competitive counter-U.S. market at a surprisingly low price point.

Purposeful resistance to the American-led status quo is not new. New, however, are the number of actors simultaneously empowered to resist U.S. influence effectively, the variety of routes and vectors from which they can threaten harm to core U.S. interests, and, finally, the volatility of an international system under persistent seismic pressure from the competing forces of integration and disintegration. In recent years, these three factors combined have coalesced into a new and novel set of national security challenges that, to date, defy the most traditional or conventional U.S./partner “challenge-response” templates.

## ABOUT THE STUDY AND FINDINGS

This study endeavors to offer the DoD useful insights on all three counts described previously. It grew from acknowledged confusion within the defense strategy and analysis communities about what gray zone challenges are, what they are not, and what they mean for the DoD going forward. In spite of a great deal of DoD-chartered work on the subject, there is no common conceptual understanding of the gray zone, its theoretical boundaries, or its specific constituent challenges. Moreover, there is no common agreement on how the U.S. defense establishment might best posture and focus to contend with gray zone challenges and its various permutations.

There are three foundational research assumptions underpinning this work. First, the United States and the U.S.-led status quo will remain under persistent assault through the near to mid-terms from a diverse array of actors, forces, and conditions. Second, gray zone competition and conflict will be the most common forms of counter-U.S. resistance for the foreseeable future and will pace U.S. defense strategy over the same period. Finally, the gray zone will increasingly create “wicked” strategic planning dilemmas for U.S. strategists until it is normalized and more fully accounted for in DoD strategy and plans.

There are those in the defense strategy and analysis communities who consistently argue that there is nothing new to gray zone competition and conflict. This study finds that while there is some merit to that argument academically; practically, it is irrelevant. The cases provided demonstrate that U.S. policymakers and military leaders have repeatedly been unprepared to counter adversaries who operate effectively in the gray zone. This study’s intensive examination of known gray zone challenges has validated all three assumptions.

Although the report acknowledges gray zone competition as whole-of-government business, this is a defense-specific study. Therefore, the work limits its recommendations to the DoD or issues directly affecting the defense enterprise: U.S. Joint Forces, and by implication, the defense and military institutions of U.S. foreign partners. This study first attempts to effectively describe or conceptualize the strategic environment and the trends contributing to the emergence of contemporary gray zone competition and conflict. Second, it identifies and classifies a finite set of pacing archetypes that defense and military leaders might consider hedging against in future strategy. Finally, in response to the aforementioned, it identifies specific findings and recommendations relevant to effective defense responses to gray zone challenges. It concludes that the gray zone’s inevitable persistence as an American military pacer will demand innovation across the DoD. This study examines the character of gray zone competition and conflict in four major archetypal categories. These categories are distinct in that each represents a unique set of gray zone conditions and circumstances that senior defense leadership must consider when assessing the relative value of U.S. strategic priorities. Three archetypes align with specific state actors – China, Russia, and Iran. All three have demonstrated a deftness and athleticism in their purposeful gray zone approaches that, to date, have outmaneuvered their seemingly less nimble U.S. competitor.

The fourth archetype is less purposeful and driven more by environmental factors. It represents the colliding forces of revolution and reaction rending at the fabric of functioning order in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Where these forces collide most violently, novel threats to American interests emerge. Often these threats fall well outside the traditional frames by which the DoD establishes its future priorities. Thus, MENA is gray less by design and more by implication.

In each case, this study finds that while the nature of consequential competition and conflict remain largely unchanged (e.g., contest of wills between two or more sides), the character of these important struggles has evolved and will continue to do so in ways that presently outpace the United States’ ability to respond effectively.

In the end, this study arrived at six major findings falling in two general issue areas. The first set of findings was in the general issue area of policy and strategy, and the

second in the area of operational plans and military capabilities. In the first general issue area, the study team found that there is no commonly shared defense or U.S. Government perspective on the nature, character, or hazard associated with gray zone threats. A second finding in this general issue area was that there is a significant asymmetry in risk perceptions between U.S. and partner decision-makers on the one hand, and adversaries on the other. In short, it appears U.S./partner strategic leaders are more risk averse or more risk-confused than are their gray zone competitors. A third and final finding in the area of policy and strategy was a realization that no deliberate grand strategy or actionable strategic charters exist to guide U.S. defense efforts against gray zone challenges.

In the second general issue area of operational plans and military capabilities, the study team made three additional findings. The first finding concerned combatant commander (CCDR) authorities. Assuming increased senior-level interest in counter-gray zone activity, the team found that presumptive CCDR authorities and responsibilities do not match. Additionally, a second finding identified significant weaknesses in the current U.S./North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) construct for joint campaigning. In short, the team discovered that the current construct was inadequate for seizing and maintaining gray zone initiative. Lastly, a third finding showed that the U.S. concepts for the design and employment of force and forces in gray zone environments were not well-adapted to actual real-world demand.

From these findings, this study arrived at four broad recommendations for consideration by the DoD. First, the team concluded that the DoD should develop and promulgate a common, compelling, and adaptive picture of gray zone threats and their hazards. Second, in the absence of comprehensive high-level strategic guidance, the DoD should “lead up” and develop actionable and classified charters for specific defense and military actions to combat discrete gray zone challenges and challengers. Third, national-level leadership and the DoD should empower U.S. CCDRs to “operate” against active gray zone competition and conflict with new capabilities and with agile and adaptive campaign models. Finally, the defense enterprise should develop and employ new and adaptable concepts, capabilities, and organizational solutions against gray zone challenges.



## II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

In August 2015, the United States Army War College (USAWC) initiated this study under the charter of the previous Army Chief of Staff General Raymond T. Odierno. Subsequently, the USAWC study team received additional sponsorship and endorsement from the Commander, Army Capabilities Integration Center (ARCIC), U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and the Chief, Joint Strategic Multi-layer Assessment Branch of the Joint Staff Deputy Directorate for Global Operations (J-39). An integrated team of four faculty and ten student investigators conducted the work over a period of 9 months, from September 2015 through May 2016. The project followed a three-phase approach.

In Phase I (September - October 2015), the USAWC study team conducted a broad literature review and a series of internal team deliberations aimed at organizing the research effort and developing a set of preliminary insights. Phase I ended with the first of two planned external working groups. The study's external working group consisted of trusted experts and stakeholders from outside of USAWC's Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). The study team selected a working group membership because they and/or their parent organizations represent important perspectives on the subject of gray zone challenges.

The working group included representatives from the military services, the Joint Staff, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, prominent think tanks, USAWC teaching faculty, and academia. Appendix I lists working group participants. The first external working group assisted USAWC researchers refine their preliminary insights, shape and scope the project's focus, and identify priorities for future inquiry.

In Phase II (November 2015 - March 2016), the USAWC team conducted a series of roundtable engagements and interviews with national security, defense, and foreign policy experts currently engaged in work related to gray zone threats. Among those consulted were prominent analysts from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), and RAND. In addition, USAWC researchers engaged U.S. and allied military leaders, diplomats, and intelligence professionals in a series of interviews and roundtables to gain their insights on gray zone challenges.

Among those consulted were experts from the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM), U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), U.S. European Command (USEUCOM), U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the Joint Staff, NATO Allied Command Transformation (SAC-T), NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence (SCoE), U.S. Army Europe (USAREUR), U.S. Army Pacific (USARPAC), U.S. Army Cyber Command and Second Army (ARCYBER), and ARCIC.

In Phase II, the USAWC study team convened the second and final external working group. The Phase II working group focused on refining and testing this study's preliminary conclusions and recommendations. Further, this working group was instrumental in identifying research gaps that this study needed to address prior to final publication.

In Phase III (March - April 2016), USAWC researchers continued with interviews and roundtable discussions while drafting their final report. Phase III involved significant external report vetting with important stakeholders as well. During Phase III, the USAWC

study team also convened a senior review group in order to vet this study's findings and recommendations prior to publication of the final report. The senior review group was comprised of five senior leaders with broad experience in defense and military strategy development. Senior review group members are listed in the acknowledgements.

Participation in both the external working group and/or the senior review group does not connote endorsement of this report or its findings by either individuals or their organizations.



### III. FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

#### FIRST PRINCIPLES – THE NATURE VERSUS CHARACTER OF WAR

In Book I of his celebrated treatise *On War*, Clausewitz defined war as “nothing but a duel on a larger scale.”<sup>4</sup> He also likened that duel to a wrestling match—a competition between two parties—each vying for the upper hand, and ultimately, through the application of force, compelling the other to accept defeat.

This definition is useful in understanding how to frame gray zone challenges for U.S. policymakers, especially if one assumes that the successful application of force can include an assortment of actions, both military and non-military, that often remain beneath the threshold of open or unambiguous conflict or outside the preferred or classical definition of war. In applying Clausewitz’s parsimonious definition to gray zone competition and conflict, this study questions the notions that gray zone challenges are not simply acts of war by another name or a sanctuary for actions that are profoundly warlike in their consequences.

If, for example, gray zone competition and conflict are actually forms of war or replacements for war, then the qualities that constitute war’s enduring nature apply with equal certainty to key exemplars of gray zone activity. While war’s nature may endure, its character changes persistently. Thus, this study argues that resort to gray zone activities by purposeful adversaries, as well as U.S. involvement in the contextual and amorphous gray challenge of collapsing authority, all represent evolutions in the character of at least some types of war—especially as they relate in practice to DoD strategy and planning.

Viewing gray zone competition through this Clausewitzian lens could be a useful starting point for strategy development. Likewise, it helps security professionals and policymakers answer key questions that will undoubtedly shape future strategy. Among those questions are the following: What is the value of the interests or objectives in play? What are the broad strategic costs associated with pursuing or defending them? How certain is success? What are the consequences of failure? Finally, given competing calculations on success and failure, is there sufficient will to pursue objectives in light of their costs, and how long can that will be maintained?

While it is not the intent of this study to characterize all competitive relationships with the United States as states of war, viewing gray zone activity within the warlike context described here forces acknowledgement of both the unchanging nature and changing character of consequential conflict. Failing to categorize it as such may lull



leaders into a dangerous place where the aforementioned questions are never addressed or are addressed much too late for desirable outcomes to remain possible.

Recognizing that the nature of war is unchanging, while persistently staying ahead of its changing character, is a critical step in the perpetual adaptation of the American defense enterprise to its most important future demands. Failure to comprehend the changing character of war and conflict as they relate to the gray zone, may in fact be what is confounding U.S. defense and security professionals so profoundly today.

Many of them are quick to argue against the gray zone's "newness." There may be nothing new about it if one only considers it in the context of the unchanging nature of war—i.e., a contest of wills. New or not, the United States and its partners appear hamstrung in every attempt to act with purpose against the most compelling challenges the gray zone has in store.

It is clear to the study team that the circumstances and methods under and by which modern competition and conflict occur are changing fundamentally. This trend includes an expansion and transformation of meaningful contestants operating in the system, the tools and methods they employ to compete, and the contexts within which they and others attack various positions and defend their own. For U.S. defense leaders, the character of meaningful competition and conflict has changed qualitatively and quantitatively. This change persistently catches the United States off guard and impairs its ability to respond to and compete effectively in the contemporary environment.

There are clear reasons behind this. The study team concludes that four failed assumptions about the strategic environment are the root of the problem.

## FIRST PRINCIPLES – FOUR FAILED ASSUMPTIONS

While the United States may remain first among equals in the contemporary environment, its ability to contend effectively with a number of increasingly capable competitors (state and nonstate) and contextual competitive forces is in question. Over the last 16 years, these challenges have compounded as U.S. strategy has increasingly run aground on the shoals of four failed strategic assumptions. All four assumptions are intrinsically interconnected and their collective failure has had cascading impacts on the U.S. defense outlook.

Persistent adherence to these four basic but increasingly faulty assumptions has effectively masked the onset of a yawning gray zone gap in U.S. defense strategy and planning. As American strategists persisted in filtering strategic thinking through the conventional wisdom of 20th-century realism, new rules or no rules were fast emerging to define the DoD's decision-making landscape.

### **Assumption 1: The United States is and will always be the good guy.**

The first failed assumption long held that the U.S.-led post-Cold War status quo would enjoy universal and perpetual approval worldwide. For three plus generations, post-World War II international norms, institutions, and economic arrangements, as well as the Cold War balance of power largely succeeded in regulating competition between the world's most consequential state actors. Indeed, the latter bi-polar balance, in

particular, dominated and moderated international security affairs for nearly 50 years. At a minimum, that same rules-based order helped avert the global catastrophe that would have been war between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The system experienced a disruptive perturbation in 1991 when the U.S.-led “West” won a peaceful victory over its communist rival. Among U.S. strategists, the end of the Cold War was widely viewed as representative of a more profound shift in international security affairs. It marked a wider triumph of liberal democracy over the alternative illiberal exercise of political authority and the presumed bellicosity that would accompany it.

This “end of history” logic held that U.S. leadership in both the victory against communism, as well as U.S. stewardship of the post-Soviet transition, would translate into a permanent and inviolable endorsement of an American-led post-Cold War order. It was further assumed that U.S. leadership would be widely recognized within that order as both a universal common good and an essential component of a stable, secure, and prosperous international system.

The United States is now acutely aware that much of the world might have different ideas. New centers of power and influence are fast emerging. Consequently, the world is increasingly multi-polar and power itself is more context-dependent. Increasing multipolarity and greater access to exploitable influence and power have given rise to a new crop of opportunistic actors who actively agitate to revise or reject the U.S.-led status quo. In brief, the United States’ defense agenda has experienced significant horizontal and vertical expansion as it progressed through the post-Cold War period. Moreover, the expansion and layering of consequential competitors on that agenda has complicated DoD prioritization and planning immensely.

### **Assumption 2: Competitors will adopt, fight, and lose according to U.S. rules.**

Yet another failed assumption held that American military dominance vis-à-vis all possible competitors would persist indefinitely with prudent U.S. investment. This assumption relied on the U.S. brand of military superiority—with its ordered model for campaigning, global reach, power projection, precision lethality; and superior technology, organization, and training—holding its value and remaining an unassailable competitive edge regardless of where or under what circumstances it was applied. In short, there was a prevailing view that the “American way of war” or, more accurately, the American preference to prepare for a particular kind of war would endure as a meaningful hedge against the most important defense-relevant threats and challenges regardless of their origin.

American strategists have seen this assumption shattered over the last 15 years. Exquisite organization, equipage, and training were enough to defeat a decaying Iraqi Army and drive the Taliban from power. However, the same perceived advantages had to undergo radical reorientation to combat shadowy insurgent armies effectively in both instances. Likewise, U.S. direct action and precision strikes have proven ruthlessly effective in culling the terrorist population from time to time. However, they have also been far less effective at either ending or even limiting the terrorist threat overall.

At the higher end of the conflict spectrum, innovation on the part of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the area of anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities already limits U.S. freedom of action in the Pacific theater in the event of increased hostilities. PLA A2AD capabilities provide China with a potent defensive umbrella under which it pursues a comprehensive offensive irredentist agenda through means and methods that include but are not limited to military activity. The Russians also aggressively pursue regional interests in their near abroad, employing hybrid cut-outs as frontline forces while deterring or limiting American and allied military response options through the promise of unacceptable high-end military escalation.

Both China and Russia maneuver nimbly through the gray zone with a mixture of capabilities and methods at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of decision and action. They both appear to have mastered the delicate balance and modulation of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression; adjusting all four across competitive domains to advance their objectives while keeping their own strategic costs and risks within an acceptable range. In both instances, their use of military force and forces is part of a broader "political-military-economic-information mosaic" of gray zone activities intended to generate synergy in strategic effects. To date, their approach has confounded U.S. and allied leadership.

### **Assumption 3: Only conflict between large and capable states matters.**

A third failed assumption applies equally to the United States, its partners, and its competitors. At work here is the lingering conceit of realist great powers unable to adapt to 21st-century realities. This assumption held too long that the only international competition and conflict that counted involved rival great powers or rival alliances. The international community presumed this to be an enduring and immutable foundation for defense planning. Prepare for the "big one" (a major interstate conflict) and the presumed result will be the reduction of all risk.

According to this assumption, raw calculation of rival powers' military, economic, and political potential and the active employment of that potential in defense of opposing core interests would persistently govern outcomes in international affairs. Among great powers, contesting one another's physical, virtual, and ideological space would largely be rules-based and orderly. Most great powers assumed that it would remain so in perpetuity.

To the extent there was anarchy, it manifested most importantly in the divergent interests of powerful states. Thus, weak states and nonstate movements were instruments or arenas of rival great power competition, not meaningful participants in it. In short, the world's most important disputes would occur between great powers, never within or transcending them. This assumption further held that real advantages in the classical instruments of coarse or hard power always trumped any countervailing use of alternative, less classical, or "smarter" tools of statecraft. Finally, in this worldview, war itself was predictable, linear, and always an escalatory extension of state policy. In this regard, it was the last step of policy. It was neither an intermediate step nor a persistent state of being.

This assumption also crashed violently into the reality of prolific discontent, profound rejection, and hyper-connectivity. Increasingly, where there was a will there would be a way for less overtly powerful states and nonstate movements and actors to be heard and felt. Thus, over the last decade and a half, more states have entered into meaningful competition with the United States. Additionally, an increasing number of consequential nonstate actors, movements, and proto-states have emerged in relatively rapid order to exercise state-like influence over the course of important international security issues. In some contexts, nonstate forces and movements replaced states or competed with states as peers. In others, they aligned with states as equals or acted as proxy instruments of states bent on advancing their interests without a sizeable commitment of their own human and material resources.

The U.S. national security community has long recognized the rising impact of non-state actors. What is new, however, is the ability of some of them to marshal sufficient capability—often over great distances in a highly distributed manner—to compete effectively with states and other state-like movements as a peer-, near-peer, or consequential spoiler.

U.S. defense strategists ignore the rise of extra-state power at their peril. Unfortunately, the default Pentagon position addresses each new nonstate challenge as it arises—e.g., al Qaeda begets the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), etc. Instead, it would be useful for the DoD to recognize the real prospect of wholesale atomization and democratization of effective counter-U.S. resistance.

#### **Assumption 4: The authority of states will remain uncontested.**

The fourth and final failed assumption is a corollary to Assumption 3. It too is not unique to the United States or its partners. It is also rooted in classical realism and is yet another example of a naïve conceit among ruling political elites worldwide.

This assumption held that states would forever be perceived *en masse* as the only legitimate and effective instruments of identity formation, political authority, and arbitration, or meaningful collective action. According to this view, states were indivisible, rational, and unitary actors. If, as argued, the only meaningful international activity occurs between powerful states or groups of powerful states, then—within states—governments would logically be the only legitimate mechanism for maintaining a monopoly on violence, exercising political authority, and cultivating animating identity, political affiliation, and loyalty. Nonstates inclined to compete in this regard were perceived as pretenders.

The 21st-century reality is quite different. Today, all states are experiencing a precipitous decline in their authority, influence, reach, and common attraction. Increasingly, states compete across thick webs of hyper-connected discontent with myriad alternative sources of political alignment or allegiance. When states outwardly appear to be weak or failing, this trend is more pronounced. However, the fraying or disintegration of formal political authority is not solely the concern of weak or failing states.

The increasing chasm between governments and their governed over the basic right to rule is likely to extend beyond the most vulnerable usual suspects. Fueled by prolific electronic connectivity and access to information, this general trend will continue to tear

at the connective tissue holding more capable and powerful states intact as well. Even powerful states now all wrestle with one another over competing interests while standing on quicksand—threatened simultaneously by capable state and nonstate rivals, as well as the fragile and restive social order they themselves rest on.

The devolution of traditional political authority has three profound defense-relevant impacts on gray zone challenges. First, purposeful gray zone challengers will encourage, foment, and exploit it in order to create favorable operating conditions for themselves. This will occur in spite of the fact that they too are vulnerable to the 21st century's disintegrative forces. Second, states and regions in or on the brink of serious civil unrest or vulnerable to cross-border political contagion are likely ripe for proxy confrontations between gray zone opponents. Finally, abrupt loss of effective political authority in important regions and states, and the sub-national and transnational rivalries emerging from it, create complex contextual gray zone challenges that can inevitably pose unpredictable, often escalatory hazards to core U.S. interests.



## IV. THE STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT – THREE ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

### A VOLATILE, UNCERTAIN, COMPLEX, AND AMBIGUOUS (VUCA) LANDSCAPE

A recent RAND report described the United States as tired of costly military intervention, politically polarized, and still recovering from a devastating years-long economic recession.<sup>5</sup> In short, an activist U.S. foreign and security policy is seen as burdensome by many—including the political and military decision-making class—in light of a difficult decade and a half of persistent conflict. This is a common perception. Yet, the United States is Janus-faced in this regard.

To be sure, there are explicit calls to look inward, reduce military spending, protect the U.S. economy, and secure the prosperity and well-being of American citizens at home first. At the same time, there are equally adamant calls for the United States to maintain its central and indispensable role in global leadership, preserve its military dominance across five critical joint domains, and secure an expansive and demanding set of national security and military objectives worldwide.<sup>6</sup> To make this effort even more challenging, the U.S. military is called to meet these objectives in a globally connected and real-time responsive information environment that connects all five domains. In the end, senior DoD leadership will have to rationalize policies and prioritize efforts in the midst of these competing national demands. The essence of effective strategy is to make the best risk-based decisions in the face of choices that appear to be equally compelling.<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of the domestic political balance of power after 2016, the Pentagon can anticipate that:

- It will be asked to secure U.S. interests against myriad sources of threat and hostility;
- It will have to persistently balance risk between multiple competing and compelling military demands;
- The means available to secure interests and buy down risk will be more finite; and finally,
- It will never be wholly ready for its next major challenge.

All of these combined mean that the DoD now and into the future will need to find innovative ways to fulfill its mission and persistently adapt to changing security conditions.

Most official defense-relevant strategic assessments characterize the current security environment as one dominated by change.<sup>8</sup> Some change will be gradual. Some change will be rapid. However, if major trend lines are correct, virtually all change will be both fundamental and profoundly disruptive to the post-World War II/post-Cold War international order over time.<sup>9</sup>

Among the most impactful sources of change are major trends in globalization, the diffusion of technology, shifting demographics, and the near certainty that power and its meaningful exercise will no longer rest solely in the hands of either the United States or its partners or, for that matter, states and state-based institutions alone. All of these trends engender significant implications for the DoD and its leadership. In addition, the last one—the fungible and shifting nature of power—should have the most immediate effect on how the DoD thinks about its contingency and threat futures. As such, it should have profound effects on the shape and employment of the military.

Ultimately, the United States will need to make choices about shaping or reacting to the most threatening or disruptive among these major trends. Challengers to U.S. leadership, adherents to the U.S.-led international order, and the United States itself will at times exploit trends to their advantage. Indeed, there is already a conscious competition for the high ground in this regard. On the other hand, many of the most disruptive trends are simply part of the new and ever-evolving contextual mosaic within which all states and peoples live, operate, adapt, thrive, or wither. These are among the most difficult to shape; thriving against them hinges on resiliency and adaptability in the face of an environment that the U.S. defense establishment commonly characterizes as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA).<sup>10</sup>

This study suggests all four VUCA characterizations are accurate reflections of the DoD's decision-making landscape. Volatility will occur from the pace and scale of future change. Uncertainty will emerge from where, when, and how major change materializes and the level of disruption involved when it does. Complexity will spring from the myriad sources of change and their tangled, sometimes obscure, connection to one another. And, finally, opacity about the causality of specific important events, as well as the motives, intentions, and methods of an expanding universe of influential actors will fuel increased ambiguity.

What is certain is perhaps equal or more important to U.S. strategic calculations than what is uncertain. What is clear is the simple fact that the United States no longer enjoys an exclusive hold on game-changing international influence. Its 25-year dominance of the global agenda, its unfettered political and military freedom of maneuver, and its unchallenged reliability as the principal guarantor of the most important security outcomes are persistently under siege from a new class of threats, competitors, and competitive forces. These conditions imply significant adjustment by the DoD is in the offing.

## AN ESSENTIAL DEFENSE REORIENTATION: THREE ALTERNATIVE ASSUMPTIONS

DoD leaders can make some clear alternative assumptions about their future decision-making and operating environments. These should replace any lingering adherence to the aforementioned failed assumptions. This study offers U.S. defense strategists three new ideas to animate future defense policy and strategy development.

First, the United States and the U.S.-led status quo will remain under persistent assault for the foreseeable future from a diverse array of actors, forces, and conditions. Second, gray zone competition and conflict will be the most common forms of counter-U.S. resistance and will pace U.S. defense strategy over the same period. Finally, third, the gray zone will increasingly create wicked strategic planning dilemmas for U.S. strategists until it is normalized and more fully accounted for in DoD strategy and plans.

The study team initiated its work with some form of these in mind and adjusted them throughout its research effort. In the team's view, these three assumptions best capture the dynamics of the fluid, complex, conflict-ridden environment the DoD will increasingly be required to commit resources against. Further, they reflect the previous four failed assumptions to effectively guide U.S. defense strategy and policy. They also appropriately represent and account for new strategic conditions. Finally, they suggest a preliminary direction for near-term defense adaptation. Translation of these and their implications into concrete defense initiatives will be important for the DoD as it transitions into the next decade.

### **Alternative Assumption 1: The U.S.-led status quo will remain under persistent assault from a diverse array of actors, forces, and conditions.**

As suggested, the United States and its defense establishment face a new class of meaningful competition. Far from a stable and uncontested U.S.-led international order, three competing types of actors vie for primacy in the contemporary security environment—status quo, revisionist, and rejectionist. Status quo actors are perceived to benefit from and are seen as actively defending the current international system's extant distribution of influence and authority. In brief, status quo actors value the current order and actively work to secure it to their advantage. The United States and its major allies and partners largely constitute the contemporary status quo.<sup>11</sup>

Revisionists are similar in stature to status quo actors. They are states that value a rules-based order but not necessarily in its current form. Thus, the revisionists oppose or resist the U.S.-led status quo and possess the requisite influence and means necessary to threaten or compel a renegotiation of it on terms more favorable to them. Obviously, any forced renegotiation of the current international order that advantages the revisionists would occur at the expense of the United States and its closest partners. In short, revisionists advocate and agitate for a more favorable redistribution of influence and authority in the U.S.-led order and demonstrate a willingness to act with purpose and volition to achieve it.

Opportunistic rivals like China, Russia, and Iran are exemplars of revisionist behavior. They all pursue systemic change on a local, regional, or global basis to their decided

advantage. In so doing, they frequently conflict with and actively undermine core U.S. and partner interests.

All open source military assessments acknowledge Russia and Iran as potential military threats.<sup>12</sup> In most cases, official language associated with China is more guarded and political, with the term “competitor” being the most common characterization.<sup>13</sup> In light of this, all three are acutely aware of the hazards and costs associated with inadvertent escalation. In this regard, the prospect of catastrophic miscalculation casts a persistent shadow over the relationship between them and the United States. Consequently, all three are keen and endeavor to achieve favorable outcomes through methods that remain well below the threshold of unambiguous provocation. They are more prone to gradually or progressively breach U.S. redlines via subtlety, ambiguity, or misdirection.

This approach works precisely because of the existing U.S. framework for great power competition. Because revisionists are large and capable states, U.S. decision-makers commonly default to a comfortable form of rules-based 20th-century realism to guide American responses to them. Simply put, the United States is playing by a rulebook for the game it wants to play, while revisionist actors are playing a different game altogether. The game metaphor illustrates how failing to recognize and adapt to the ever-changing character of war and consequential competition creates problems for strategists and policymakers. Fundamentally, the U.S. approach has proven faulty. Moreover, until U.S. decision-makers begin playing the right game, American responses are likely to continue to fall short.

The term rejectionist speaks for itself. As the term implies, these actors reject the veracity and utility of the current U.S.-led international order, as well as its distribution of power and authority. They are largely destroyers, not builders. In short, rejectionists seek to discard the extant international order altogether.

They self-identify as profoundly aggrieved, denied, or disenfranchised. Rejectionists are keen to confront what they perceive to be the unfair and illegitimate exercise of status quo political authority and they are loath to accept a new, revisionist-led status quo that might also profit at their expense. As such, they reside and operate predominantly beneath, adjacent to, in direct competition with, or beyond the reach of state actors. They persistently militate against state authority and create or thrive in generalized disorder.

In the current environment, where power is becoming more context-dependent, rejectionist actors are able to wield more influence than was previously possible. In the past, these actors could not afford to compete with or significantly alter the status quo. The price of entry associated with sparring with state competitors on equal or somewhat advantaged terms was simply too high. Now, the confluence of hyper-connectivity, fraying state authority, widespread popular disaffection, organic resistance to the status quo, distributed activism, and a real proliferation of lethal and disruptive potential provide unprecedented opportunities for rejectionists to pursue their objectives.<sup>14</sup>

Today, the most fragile quarters of the state system may be most vulnerable to rejectionist actors and movements. Yet, no one is immune from their destructive discontent. The very forces that enable rejectionists to thrive are also, by definition, those that are progressively eroding traditional state authority, expanding vulnerabilities in the contemporary environment, and exposing even more space that might be ripe for their exploitation.<sup>15</sup>

Cyberspace, for example, provides rejectionists (and revisionists) unprecedented opportunities for mischief. The cyber domain allows rejectionists to recruit or connect like-minded communities, indoctrinate adherents, mobilize distributed resistance and activism, and fight untethered from the limitations of geography and distance.<sup>16</sup> The apparent devolution of the greater Middle East and the proliferation of a wide universe of violent extremist organizations (VEO) are clear harbingers of rejectionist trends. The formless, multi-sided civil conflict in the northern Persian Gulf and Levant, as well as ISIL's out of area agitation, are prominent artifacts of the rejectionist strain.

Since 9/11 and the post-invasion collapse of the Iraqi state and society, the disruptive potential of stateless rejectionists has been obvious to U.S. decision-makers. More troubling, the most recent strain of VEO activity (e.g., Paris, Santa Monica, Sinai, Istanbul, Brussels, etc.) has demonstrated the effortless portability of rejectionism from a regional to a global threat.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, rejectionist forces will not remain confined to or only emerge from the Middle East as long as the thick webs of network connectivity that both unite and divide traditional social constructions (e.g., community, region, and nation-state) continue to metastasize.

**Alternative Assumption 2: Gray zone competition and conflict will be the most common forms of counter-U.S. resistance and will pace U.S. defense strategy, concepts, and capabilities.**

Revisionists and rejectionists operating inside the gray zone will have profound implications for the DoD. Some will operate with specific counter-U.S. intent. Others will threaten core U.S. interests and counter U.S. position by implication.

All purposeful gray zone challengers recognize U.S. strength but perceive the comprehensive or universal applicability of that strength to be eroding.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they attempt to pursue interests and objectives in a manner that is virtually always provocative on some level but avoids direct military confrontation or conflict whenever possible. Most often these actors employ means and methods that exploit their own areas of relative strength or advantage (e.g., proximity, political ambiguity, ethno-sectarian dominance, etc.), while purposefully targeting a known or emerging U.S. or partner weakness.

At the state level, for example, gray zone revisionists are prone to engage in aggressive competition that occurs neither wholly in the benign, often mutually beneficial, realm of routine international relations nor in that of open warfare by any classic definition. Further, regardless of whether or not gray zone competition is viewed as war by either side, it will inevitably have a strong military component and will have major warlike implications and outcomes for all parties involved.

The military implications of gray zone competition are hybrid in nature. It can take on a dangerously high-end form, especially in the case of large, capable revisionist gray zone state actors. For example, the development and positioning of ballistic missiles, sophisticated A2AD capabilities, weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and emerging threats to space assets and cyber infrastructure have the potential to drive significant defense initiatives to counter these sophisticated and highly technical capabilities.

Likewise, it can occur in the muddier terrain of unconventional or irregular conflict through cultivation and employment by adversaries of terrorism, insurgency, covert

activities, and subversion. Both revisionists and rejectionists will likely create symbiotic combinations of hostile or violent methods with alternative softer tools of influence, intimidation, and coercion. Each one of these threat capabilities alone poses a significant challenge to American freedom of action. The possibility of their combined employment as part of a hybrid campaign creates strategic and operational dilemmas that are difficult to ignore. Indeed, their combined employment in active campaign-quality competition or conflict presents U.S. decision-makers with complex and multi-layered risk choices.

Gray zone challenges always create fundamental asymmetries in risk perceptions. For American strategists, each counter-option—whether or not it occurs below the threshold of active hostilities or in the course of open warfare—is perceived at the highest levels of decision-making to engender high risks. The threatened employment of a sophisticated opponent’s A2AD capabilities, for example, hazards human and material costs that are difficult to either comprehend or accept—not to mention their effectiveness in disrupting American power projection into critical regions of the world. The perception of irrevocable costs in high-end military interventions against a capable but still objectively weaker state adversary are likely to dissuade even the most hawkish senior decision-makers from taking justifiable but also provocative action well prior to open hostilities. That widely recognized hesitation opens broad avenues for maneuver in the coercive space short of war.

Gray zone opponents can perceive inaction or ineffective action in response to them as an open door for stronger and more assertive follow-on actions. For example, a sophisticated gray zone actor may be prone to pursue its interests via proxies and cut-outs—all under the shadow of its own significant military capabilities—in order to drive up U.S./allied risk calculations.<sup>19</sup> In other instances, where sovereignty is disputed, the gray zone actor can first employ policy and non-military instruments of coercion to stake claims and crowd out weaker competition.<sup>20</sup> When these actions go unanswered with firm countervailing responses, the gray zone actor solidifies and fortifies their position with military capability.

Ambiguity about causality, motives, and intentions leave room for risk-conscious policymakers to demur in the face of gray zone provocation. This combined with hypersensitivity toward the hazards of escalation and the secondary or tertiary effects that may come from response to gray zone activism can retard effective counteraction and, by implication, greenlight greater assertiveness by purposeful competitors.

In the event that open and violent conflict becomes unavoidable with either revisionists or rejectionists, it is more likely than not to unfold in ways that are inconsistent with the traditional rules and biases favored by the Pentagon. Instead, as suggested previously, it will manifest in post-modern and hybrid combinations of methods and capabilities, borrowing liberally from those of the conventional, unconventional, political, and criminal.<sup>21</sup>

These future hybrid wars promise cocktail-like effects as U.S. adversaries limit their exposure; impose costs across dimensions, domains, and functions; and create wicked challenges for the United States.<sup>22</sup> Without significant military adaptation in response, American forces may find themselves conceptually outmaneuvered by innovative hybrid opponents. Thus, like the carrier category of gray zone competition and conflict, hybrid warfare will persistently evolve and stretch the conceptual boundaries of war and peace as Washington currently understands them.

### Alternative Assumption 3: The gray zone will increasingly create wicked strategic planning dilemmas for U.S. strategists until it is normalized and more fully accounted for in DoD strategy and plans.

The new class of high priority gray zone problems are all wicked by definition.<sup>23</sup> They will increasingly manifest in less traditional, more hybrid versions of war and violent conflict, as well as in forms of aggressive statecraft. These forms will feature comprehensive employment by adversaries of compounding methods and means that are short on violence while long on hostility, hostile intent, and the long shadow of prohibitive cost. In this environment, one thing is clear: the U.S.-led status quo is under attack by purpose and happenstance from a complex array of forces. Moreover, without careful consideration and deliberate counteraction, the resulting torque on the American-led status quo may fatally jeopardize the U.S. position.

Collectively, gray zone challenges and challengers have no common origin, locus, antagonist, or solutions against which a parsimonious set of priorities might guide DoD-level strategic concepts, doctrine, plans, and capabilities in response. Further, both action and inaction to counter any specific manifestation of new-age gray zone competition and conflict appear to engender significant risk.

As discussed in the opening, the gray zone is gray because it lies between what are increasingly artificial but nonetheless widely acknowledged poles in American strategic culture. On the one hand, there is the artificial state of peace and its associated benign interactions between state actors. Peace in this regard is the idyllic routine of (international) community life. As each actor in the community (in particular, the United States) seeks to advantage itself, its behavior neither occurs nor is perceived to be occurring at the expense of others.

On the other hand, the equally artificial state of war is the unambiguous opposite of peace. Hostility is open and explicit. There are clearly differentiated sides with equally differentiated positions. Right and wrong are apparent as well, and therefore, there are obvious offenders that prey on those that are undeniably offended. According to its collective self-image, there is no doubt where the United States believes it lies in any aspect of this construction. In addition, it is difficult for the United States to believe that others—especially those it perceives to be responsible nation-states—hold a different view.

In reality, neither condition should exist as exclusive pacers for American strategists. The DoD responsibility to prevail in a high-end military confrontation remains unchanged. Today, however, the United States is rarely at either war or peace by their classical definitions. Instead, adversaries and competitors purposefully and persistently campaign against it in the conceptual area lying between them. This occurs at the hands of an identifiable set of important revisionist actors bent on either supplanting or limiting American influence in critical regions of the world. Likewise, the United States is actively combatting violent rejectionist forces whose object is often less immediately the United States, but instead, the order that allows the United States to both exercise and extend its reach with impunity and to buttress the traditional authority structures that rejectionists find illegitimate and unacceptable.

What these challenges share is the volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that U.S. policymakers are quick to acknowledge in the abstract but loath to account

for meaningfully in strategy and policy. While the separate struggles against revisionist and rejectionist forces may have a common home in-between, they are confounding to the defense enterprise because they are so profoundly different in practice. To contemporary decision-makers, risk assessment, strategy, and risk mitigation in the gray zone appear at first to lie on a veritable “parade of horribles” — where the results of U.S. activism in the face of gray zone threats can only land along a spectrum of adverse outcomes.

Acting against purposeful gray zone actors with the military instrument — with force and forces, for example — hazards escalation to general war. In at least two cases of real-world gray zone revisionist threats, this equates to general war with a nuclear power, — a prospect U.S. strategists have spent very little time contemplating since 1991. Against rejectionist actors finding sanctuary in disorder, the abject indeterminacy of the utility and projected outcomes associated with intervention are enough to trigger inaction or half-measures instead of well-conceived commitment. In virtually every instance of meaningful gray zone threat, profound uncertainty about what deliberate counteraction might mean for the nature, scale, and complexity of the problem over time deters meaningful action.

Failure to respond effectively to gray zone provocations is itself a high-risk proposition. Inaction or half-measures likely embolden revisionists and rejectionists while weakening the U.S. grip on status quo norms. This enables gray zone actors to pursue and achieve their aims without obstacles or tangible repercussions. In addition, it likely encourages new actors to enter the counter-U.S. market at persistently lower costs. With the barriers to entry collapsing and more diverse and empowered actors entering the counter-U.S. market, the DoD’s decision-making landscape will become fundamentally more challenging.

As the DoD contemplates its expanding gray zone problem, it should view its choices through a risk-based prism. That risk structure should balance the security of core interests against the cost associated with willfully compromising them to avoid uncertain hazards. This study explores this idea in the following section.

## V. RISK-INFORMED APPROACH TO ASSESSING GRAY ZONE CHALLENGES

### A WAY TO THINK ABOUT RISK

Strategy development identifies core objectives and the principal obstacles that exist to securing them. It charters an approach to meeting and safeguarding those objectives over time. Strategy then prioritizes the allocation and distribution of resources to achieve these objectives. Finally, all strategy requires stress testing. After all, even the most exquisite plans engender hazards. Therefore, identification of the vulnerabilities exposed by a chosen strategy's interactions with prospective rivals and rival circumstances requires thorough and deliberate risk assessment. Thus, a final essential component of strategy development always involves calculated risk mitigation.

All risk assessment involves informed judgments on the likelihood and consequences of failure that are associated with a strategy or some component of it. Risk arrives via manifest vectors. There is, for example, ample room to misjudge the character of principal threats, the extent of one's own limitations, or the scope and scale of the environment's most challenging obstacles to mission accomplishment.

Further, objectives may be unrealistic and therefore unachievable. The strategic approach adopted to secure objectives may be wrong, and the resources available to execute the strategy may be insufficient, inappropriate, or poorly focused. Each by itself constitutes a potential single point of failure and, therefore, a decisive point for thorough risk assessment by senior leadership. Thus, there is no substitute or shortcut for risk assessment in strategy development and implementation.

This report proceeds from that foundational belief. Therefore, the findings and recommendations outlined herein are risk-informed. This study begins from the hypothesis that gray zone competition and conflict are inherently high-risk propositions for the United States and its partners. The research ultimately validated that assumption.

By and large, the character and extent of the strategic-level risks associated with gray zone competition and conflict spring from the complex interaction between core U.S. interests, the VUCA environment within which those interests are in play, and the hostile actors and adverse forces most likely to thrive and compete with the United States for primacy. Therefore, an explicit goal of this report is to aid senior DoD leadership in effectively navigating through the inherently high-risk gray operating space to arrive at the best strategic courses of action.

#### Strategic Insights – Risk

- Gray zone competition and conflict are inherently high-risk propositions for the United States and its partners.
- Gray zone risk is the likelihood that the DoD has inadequately anticipated demands and as a result, hazards failure or drastic underperformance.
- Gray zone challenges put the United States on the "horns of dilemma"—risks associated with action and inaction appear to be equally high and unpalatable.



## GRAY ZONE RISK DEFINED

Risk enjoys various interpretations. Common to all, however, is the symbiotic relationship between the likelihood of some adverse outcome and the consequences of its possible emergence. From there, alternative perspectives on risk emerge from differences in context, discipline, and issue or function. In mathematics, risk is the likelihood of an undesirable event—often a quantitative expression between 0 and 100 percent.<sup>24</sup> In engineering, risk is the “mean time between failure.”<sup>25</sup> Engineers acknowledge inherent imperfection in their designs and they strive to delay failure while persistently identifying and incorporating alerts that might signal the onset of catastrophe.

No one can predict perfectly how the vagaries of economics will affect business outcomes. However, those responsible for gauging financial risk for corporations, shareholders, and customers do believe they can sift through an infinite number of important variables and identify an accurate confidence interval of possible economic results. Understanding this bounded range of outcomes—with their upper and lower limits—is invaluable to the process of allocating finite resources in pursuit of desired outcomes. In the process of prioritizing investments and allocating resources against them, the likelihood that investments will underperform and, thus, push real outcomes downward is a significant component of financial risk assessment.

These various interpretations inform this study’s approach to risk. However, it does not dwell on nor draw principal inspiration from the quantitative aspects of risk assessment. For its risk lens, the study team adopted a leaner and more qualitative approach to assess U.S./partner strategy vis-à-vis the various gray zone actors and archetypes considered. The study team concluded that risk was the likelihood that existing U.S. strategy, strategic approaches, and military concepts and capabilities have inadequately anticipated future gray zone demands and, therefore, have increased prospects for either drastic underperformance or outright failure.

For example, purposeful actors who oppose U.S./partner objectives may seek to challenge elements of the American strategy employed to secure them. They may judge key elements of the strategy to be under-defined, under-resourced, under-considered, unrehearsed, or untested and, therefore, vulnerable to exploitation. Even limited adversary success might embolden them to future escalation. Further, success by one purposeful actor may lead to more frequent testing by others who seek to mimic or replicate success within their own spheres of influence and interest.

If U.S./partner strategy exhibits exploitable weaknesses or if resolve to act on them proves vulnerable in practice, visible setbacks are likely to accrue. The frequency and intensity of probing by adversaries and competitors, for example, may accelerate with subsequent U.S. failures against them. In short, once a strategic course of action or its implementation fail or are demonstrably failing, adversaries will exploit their weakest elements. Consequently, the likelihood of future failure will rise dramatically. The study team perceives this to be the case with respect to the United States and its current approach to gray zone competition and conflict.

This report looks at the U.S./partner gray zone risk challenge holistically, acknowledging that this potential for failure is seeded into each stage of strategy development and implementation. As argued previously, the team’s interpretation of risk focuses on

two key lines of inquiry and the prospect for misjudging the risks associated with them. Again, adverse outcomes can emerge from actions undertaken and actions deferred. Each risk vector—action and inaction—is anchored in the accepted conceptions of risk described earlier.

## THE HORNS OF A STRATEGIC DILEMMA: RISK OF INACTION VERSUS RISK OF ACTION

Gray zone challenges grip U.S. and partner decision-making and persistently put strategy development and implementation squarely on the horns of a seemingly intractable dilemma. In some instances, senior U.S. and allied leaders perceive that active and assertive responses to gray zone competition and conflict hazard undesirable escalation, excessive cost; and uncertain, indeterminate, or unfavorable outcomes. Thus, they perceive an inherent “risk of action.”

On the other hand, marginal, ineffectual, or non-existent responses to gray zone challenges can engender the opposite—some significant “risk of inaction.” Here choosing not to act—likely because of the perceived risks engendered—leads to equally unpalatable outcomes. The United States, for example, potentially vacates or leaves vulnerable core interests to the predations of hostile forces; U.S. decision-makers hoping but not knowing for sure whether opponents will seize on the opportunities inaction presents.

In this regard, gray zone competition and conflict may represent the most uncomfortable and vexing decision space possible for U.S. leadership. Senior defense leaders cannot determine which course of action holds greater advantage and, in the process, they surrender initiative to competitors and adversaries. In the gray zone, the risks associated with action and those of inaction appear to be or are in fact, equally high.

Paralysis results and the space for adversary maneuver opens. This study concludes that this idea is a principal distinguishing characteristic of virtually all gray zone challenges. Thus, at face value, senior defense leaders are often left with a “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” proposition where no obvious advantages appear to exist for any single response course of action.

Of the two vectors, risk of action is the most poignant, operative, and scrutinized. It is the principal hazard that might accompany classic errors of commission. The cost-benefit calculation associated with risk of action may generally be clearer and the potential costs of miscalculation are often immediately higher.

In short, calculation of the risk of action involves some judgment on the likelihood that a chosen strategic course is in fact a misstep or mistake that will make matters worse, weaken or disadvantage U.S. position, or dramatically increase risk to U.S. interests. Risk of action includes the prospect for errors of analysis or judgment that trigger costly strategic-level action against a security challenge that is profoundly misunderstood, mischaracterized, or—in reality—non-existent. Further, it includes both risk considerations of taking any action at all, as well as those associated with taking particular types of action.

In addition to the immediate political, human, material, and financial costs, a prominent hazard stemming from failed or marginally effective action is the very open demonstration of U.S. limitations and vulnerabilities. Somalia (1992), Iraq (2003), and Libya



(2012), are often cited as examples of military action that did not achieve desired results, incurred unanticipated strategic costs, and arguably worsened the existing security situation.<sup>26</sup>

Risk of inaction also involves fundamental miscalculation. It is the mirror image of, and has a symbiotic relationship with, the former. It is the family of hazards that would emerge from classic errors of omission, where overt and veiled but quite real challenges are incorrectly identified as low or no threat. Like risk of action, those of inaction emerge from a misunderstanding and mischaracterization of the environment and its challenges. In the case of risks of inaction, however, senior leaders miss the immediacy, significance, or impact of purposeful or contextual defense-relevant conditions. Creeping, indirect, peripheral, or ambiguous threats fail to animate action in time to avoid disruptive or destabilizing events.

In addition to a desire to avoid the menu of hazards associated with the risk of action, two prominent motivations for inaction are important in risk calculations. First, inaction may stem from a desire to wait things out. This is principally a combined judgment about time, resources, and objectives – i.e., there is no immediate hazard, we have time before it becomes one, and it's likely we will have everything we need if the need for a response becomes unavoidable. In the meantime, the logic holds that it is more likely than not that the conditions of concern will subside, remain tolerable, or resolve themselves well prior to intervention becoming necessary.

The second motive concerns escalation and the desire to avoid it. This logic holds that all disputes short of overt attack can be resolved without taking more aggressive or assertive action. A common argument against more assertive action against revisionist powers like China and Russia, for example, is avoiding undesirable or dangerous escalation.<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, this argument proceeds from the belief that status quo norms will prevail if given a chance. Moreover, that a more aggressive attempt to moderate gray zone activism will end in unwanted and costly escalation that cannot possibly benefit the United States or its partners. The study team perceives both motives to be dominant considerations in contemporary U.S. gray zone risk calculations.

Ultimately, effective calculation of the risks of inaction requires new sensitivity to the significance of seemingly unconnected or benign events, the risk- and pain-tolerance of adversaries, as well as a new appreciation for the speed, scale, and scope of change in the international system and its distribution of power and influence. Further, persistent appraisal of the real prospects for escalation vis-à-vis purposeful revisionist state actors is in order as well. In reality, the U.S. threshold for defining threats – particularly those in the gray zone – will need to be recalibrated, as our protocols for identifying hazards and hazardous trends are handicapped by decades of conventional defense bias and adherence to the four failed assumptions.

On balance, the study team perceives that the risks associated with inaction are, in reality, potentially higher and more permanent than those typically associated with action. Inaction or ineffective action hazards gradual but nonetheless fundamental loss of position vis-à-vis competitors. Holding out for the evolution of favorable outcomes comes with it the prospect for their never coming to pass. In the process, strategic losses accrue to such an extent that delayed action to recoup them engenders unacceptable costs.

Action will always engender significant risk as well. This is especially true for action that involves threatened use of military force. However, in most cases, action offers advantages to those committed to thorough horizon scanning and planning. That commitment buys some insurance against the worst strategic hazards and gives policymakers and strategists all the benefits of initiative.

## FIVE GRAY ZONE ARCHETYPES

In light of the environmental trends outlined previously in this report, as well as the appreciation of risk, the study team identified a set of contemporary archetypal gray zone challenges against which it gauges U.S. defense strategy, plans, and capabilities. Each archetype offers a brief description of the specific challenge and its character, an analysis of recent U.S. actions in response to it, and finally, key risk judgments. The five archetypes considered are:

- **“The Dragon.”** China is a revisionist actor. It demonstrates an artful ability to challenge U.S. spheres of influence while skillfully remaining below the threshold of perceived U.S. redlines.
- **“The Bear.”** Russia too is a revisionist actor. It demonstrates an ability to adapt to the 21st century, innovatively reasserting its influence by combining traditional and non-traditional methods and capabilities.
- **“The Lion.”** Iran is a hybrid revisionist/rejectionist actor seeking to expand its regional influence by asserting itself into a fragile – sometimes disordered – environment that favors bold, purposeful action.
- **“The Scorpion.”** A disordered and devolving MENA environment characterized by vulnerable, failed, or fractured states is fertile ground for the hybrid combination of malevolent state and nonstate actors.
- **“The Eagle.”** Although currently a status quo power, the United States has at times been an effective gray zone actor itself. It can learn a great deal from its experiences. In addition, competitors will pace themselves according to the past American example.



## Analysis of Gray Zone Archetypes





## VI. ENTER THE DRAGON – CHINA AS A HIGH-END GRAY ZONE REVISIONIST

“The supreme art of war is to subdue your enemies without fighting.”  
-Sun Tzu<sup>28</sup>

### ASIA’S LOOMING GRAY ZONE CHALLENGE

Emboldened by more than 2 decades of significant economic growth, expanding political influence, increasing military capability, and rising nationalism, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has become a capable rival to dominant U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific region. China is currently without peer in its ability to present American decision-makers with complex strategic-level dilemmas underwritten by the resources and guile of a capable and driven revisionist power.

China’s rapid multi-dimensional growth as a rising great power, as well as its deliberate, artful, and modulated employment of the tangible fruits of that growth, have enabled it to effectively challenge U.S. position in the region. To date, the PRC has practiced its brand of revisionist counter-U.S. resistance entirely in the gray zone. It employs different combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and veiled aggression to approach, probe, and, at times, violate perceived U.S./partner redlines while skillfully remaining below the threshold of outright military provocation.<sup>29</sup>

China’s campaign-like approach to gray zone competition and conflict liberally mixes political, military, and commercial instruments. China employs its military and paramilitary forces, government agencies, and state-owned enterprises as weapons. Its methods include aggressive commercial expansion, non-violent coercive military force, the intimidating use of law enforcement and maritime paramilitary capabilities, as well as extensive exploitation of cyber and information operations.<sup>30</sup>

So far, these actions have enabled China to contest and sometimes dominate competitive spaces and thereby achieve warlike aims without resorting to warlike violence.<sup>31</sup> As China appears to gain ground vis-à-vis the United States via these methods, American strategists and decision-makers hazard the appearance of paralysis, decline, and unreliability as the region’s security partner of choice. Failure, in this regard, would overturn 70-plus years of alliance confidence and create new and worrisome vulnerabilities for U.S. security and commercial interests in the region.

#### Strategic Insights – Enter the Dragon

- China is a revisionist actor. It demonstrates an artful ability to challenge U.S. spheres of influence while skillfully avoiding perceived U.S. redlines.
- China is building A2AD capabilities to picket its disputed territorial interests in the first island chain and the South China Sea; employing influence, intimidation, and coercion to achieve warlike ends and contest U.S. regional dominance.
- Beijing’s campaign-like gray zone competition integrates all elements of national power. The U.S. response to it is still evolving.
- “Risk of inaction” appears to be a principal source of defense-relevant hazard with respect to China.



## STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT: A PROFOUNDLY INSECURE ASIA

U.S. economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia, creating a mix of evolving challenges and opportunities. Accordingly...we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.

— 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance<sup>32</sup>

In the 2012 “Defense Strategic Guidance,” the President outlined an American strategic rebalance or “pivot” to the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>33</sup> A stable, peaceful, and thriving Asia-Pacific region is widely acknowledged as critical to American security and prosperity. Four of seven operative mutual defense treaties, for example, involve U.S. relationships with Asia-Pacific nations (Japan, South Korea, Australia-New Zealand, and the Philippines).<sup>34</sup> Further, seven of the United States’ top 15 trading partners are members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum (Canada, Mexico, PRC, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan) and approximately 60 percent of all U.S. export goods are sold in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>35</sup> The latter two factors, in particular, are likely to experience material increases as regional economies are on track to grow faster than the world average for some time.<sup>36</sup> In light of these factors, the region as a whole is certain to grow even more important in U.S. security calculations.

Evidenced by the rebalance, Asia looms large as the most dominant strategic issue on the DoD’s near-term agenda. The renewed inertia behind securing U.S. Asia-Pacific interests stems in large measure from a perceived growth in the number, scale, and intensity of threats to a stable, peaceful, and thriving Asia-Pacific region. The vectors of potential hazard are manifest, and senior U.S. leaders perceive the interests at stake in the region to be among the most vital.

For example, the combustible combination of contested sovereignty over disputed territory and waters, lingering cross-border animus on mainland Asia, and increasing region-wide militarization (including nuclear proliferation) are creating or exacerbating flash points between regional powers. The most dangerous or immediate among these fault lines (e.g., the East and South China Seas, Taiwan, and the Korean Peninsula) not only undermine the general American interest in regional stability, peace, and prosperity; but also often directly involve the security of U.S. treaty allies. Complicating an already tense environment, the region is not immune from falling victim to or exporting the same violent extremist activity plaguing the Middle East.

In addition to the aforementioned traditional security challenges, there are more fundamental, less purposeful threats to human security emerging from the region as well. Asia has 57 percent of the world’s population and eight of the world’s top 10 megacities.<sup>37</sup> These facts, combined with the Asia-Pacific region’s history as the world’s most disaster-prone, create a recipe for serial future catastrophe.<sup>38</sup> Asia’s concentrated human vulnerability and the persistent prospect for natural, man-made, or man-enabled disaster co-exist in the region, often to devastating effect.

This is particularly true for vulnerable populations living along the littorals, near or astride dangerous seismic fault lines, in the path of unpredictable and often deadly weather patterns; or in general, where the worst effects of underdevelopment and climate change are likeliest to collide. These combined effects increase the likelihood the

Asia-Pacific region will not only be gripped by persistent high-end military tensions in places like the Korean Peninsula, the East Asian Littoral, and the South China Sea (SCS) but also that Asia and the wider Pacific region will remain uniquely vulnerable to unanticipated strategic-level disaster as well. Each has the potential to be profoundly destabilizing and disruptive.

## A RISING CHINA AS A DEFENSE PACER

While all the factors previously described figure into U.S. defense calculations in the Asia-Pacific region, China's emergence as a capable great power rival dominates U.S. defense strategy. In short, there would be no rebalance required without the PRC moving as dramatically as it has into a prominent position vis-à-vis the United States.

China's rise is explained as much by its long and deep historical and cultural experience as it is from deliberate actions taken by those recent and current leaders most identified with its ascendance to great power status. Sino-centrism has framed Chinese thinking for centuries. It is embodied in the belief that China is a superior civilization with a legitimate claim as the cultural center of the world. In Mandarin, China's name literally translates to "Middle Kingdom."<sup>39</sup> Thus, China's renewed activist strategy to ascend to great power is rooted in the idea of assuming its rightful place in world affairs.

China is clearly also driven by a desire to redress wrongs it has incurred at the hands of foreign powers. The "Century of Humiliation," for example, was the period extending from the first Opium War in the mid-19th century to the post-World War II era. During that time, China suffered defeat in major wars, unraveled politically, and serially succumbed to the demands of outside powers.<sup>40</sup> While both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-Tung declared an end to the Century of Humiliation in 1945 and 1949 respectively, the effect of this disastrous period on the psychology of the Chinese people and leadership continues to serve as a unifying reference for nationalist sentiment.<sup>41</sup>

These cultural and historical factors underpin more recent developments in China's pursuit of great power status. The most significant of these is the dramatic growth of the Chinese economy. Beginning in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China instituted a series of economic reforms known as "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" following the death of Mao Tse-Tung. These reforms included the de-collectivization of agriculture, an opening up to foreign investments, privatization of state-owned industries, and the establishment of a market economy.<sup>42</sup>

The reforms launched China on a path that catapulted it from an economy of less than \$200 billion in gross domestic product (GDP) in 1978 to an economy boasting over \$10 trillion in GDP today.<sup>43</sup> China is currently the second largest economy in the world and remains one of the fastest growing. It is projected to overtake the United States by 2026.<sup>44</sup>

Enabled by robust economic growth, China has taken significant steps to transform its military into a modern, capable force. Its focus and pacers are clearly U.S. joint forces. Chinese military forces have evolved and are approaching peer-like status to even the most advanced U.S. forces operating in the Asia-Pacific region.

As in the case of China's economic reforms, Deng initiated Chinese military reform as well. Under Deng, China began sweeping military reforms that have included



transforming organizational structure, education, doctrine, training, and force modernization.<sup>45</sup> For example, China's modern ballistic arsenal poses one of the most dangerous threats to U.S. and allied security in the region. Capabilities like the DF-21 anti-ship ballistic missile – nicknamed the “Carrier Killer” – have increased anxiety inside the Pentagon over the ability of the U.S. military to project power in the region. Additionally, China recently began construction of the first domestically built aircraft carrier in December 2015 and plans to build at least one more over the next 15 years.<sup>46</sup> In all cases, Chinese military modernization is paced by threats it perceives from U.S./ partner defense policy and capabilities. Virtually all of China's most significant military reforms focus on matching or countering U.S. military operations and assets.

## CHINA'S LENS

From China's perspective, it sees seven main sources of potential threat:<sup>47</sup>

- Hostile foreign influence in its domestic and economic affairs;<sup>48</sup>
- Bordering countries;<sup>49</sup>
- The United States and its perceived strategy of “containment;”<sup>50</sup>
- U.S. regional allies challenging highly valued resources in the South and East China Seas;<sup>51</sup>
- A potential Korean conflict that could include WMD use;<sup>52</sup>
- Internationally sponsored violent extremist terrorism;<sup>53</sup> and finally,
- Internal, domestic challenges to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Among these, the last is the most worrisome for China. The steadily worsening impacts of smog and wastewater are manifest in healthcare costs, domestic dissatisfaction, and loss of international legitimacy. Additionally, the loss of near coast fisheries and organic ocean resources are mounting problems plaguing the CCP.<sup>54</sup>

Other challenges include domestic unrest driven by high unemployment, blowback from China's expanding state control of property, and forceful eviction of former land-owners.<sup>55</sup> Another challenge is the ever-present CCP obligation of providing adequate sources of nutrition and reasonable quality of life for over a billion Chinese citizens.<sup>56</sup> Finally, there is internal pressure on China's ruling elite to fulfill their binding promise to a long-suffering population – a world-leading economic rise and realization of superpower ambitions.<sup>57</sup>

In the face of these internal and external challenges, China's overall strategy appears focused on three principal goals:

- Maintain communist party rule;
- Gain, secure, and sustain the resources essential to a steady, peaceful rise; and finally,
- Revise the current world order in its favor and achieve global superpower status.<sup>58</sup>

To pursue these goals, China has to gain access to vast raw materials from within China, as well as in Southeast Asia, Africa, and North and South America. Further, it needs to be able to access the best commercial and technological advantages to create

and exploit new opportunities. This likely will entail illicit cyber activity that enables access to and exploitation of privileged foreign government and business data.

In spite of enormous demographic, resource, and environmental challenges, China will also need to find innovative ways to increase its economic capacity as well. Finally, to underwrite its emergence to great power, China will need to continue to modernize its large military that is increasingly competitive regionally but still qualitatively behind its principal U.S. rival in many important respects.<sup>59</sup>

## CHINA'S GRAY ZONE APPROACH

To avoid open conflict, China pursues its objectives almost entirely in the gray zone. One such prominent gray zone approach is its reliance on military and paramilitary intimidation and the non-violent use of military force.

China boasts the world's second highest defense budget and the world's largest military, making its forces extremely effective instruments of intimidation, coercion, and veiled aggression. China's employment of military and paramilitary force and forces can effectively deter rivals attempting to counter gray zone activity. By hinting or implying that armed escalation may be its next course of action, China effectively boxes in less powerful or more risk averse opponents.<sup>60</sup> For instance, the PLA has acquired and arrayed complex A2AD capabilities to counter U.S. and allied military interference. They have built up islands in the SCS as bases. They are deploying larger numbers of stealthy diesel submarines, advanced air defenses and sea-mines, and sophisticated ballistic and cruise missiles.<sup>61</sup>

China is increasing its A2AD capabilities through the construction of aircraft and submarine bases extending out from its coastline (e.g. Hainan Island and the Spratly Islands).<sup>62</sup> This longer reach enables China to conduct anti-access operations from forward land-based locations without overextending the PLA Navy. It also allows the PLA Navy to focus more on blue-water operations with limited numbers of aircraft carriers.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, China's development of exo-atmospheric missiles and counter-satellite lasers threaten to deny critical U.S. abilities.<sup>64</sup> These anti-access threats are reminders of the high cost that might be associated with active U.S. military interference with Chinese pursuits.<sup>65</sup>

While China's military activities are concerning by themselves, its gray zone approach involves significant blending of the military and softer non-military instruments of power. Recent examples are China's pledge to provide several thousand designated United Nations (UN) peacekeeping forces along with UN development funds for worldwide employment and deliberate moves to promote China's international image. China's establishment of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank to diminish the power of established Western institutions like the World Bank in favor of Chinese-controlled interests is also a deliberate step.<sup>66</sup>

Additionally, the subsidizing of its SCS civilian fishing fleets provides satellite-based marine radios that help China to surveil and patrol the SCS and harass "trespassing" fishing boats, commercial vessels, and ships employed in resource exploration.<sup>67</sup> Finally, the Chinese-owned Offshore Oil Corporation (COOC) has now procured the most capable oil-drilling platform in the SCS (guarded by China's military and law enforcement

fleets).<sup>68</sup> Due to China's successful intimidation and interdiction of rival SCS resource claimants, the COOC now conducts drilling operations across the SCS at depths beyond the capability of any regional competitor.<sup>69</sup>

In the information sphere, China has moved away from using terms like "peaceful rise" and "peaceful development," in favor of the tougher terms President Xi uses to communicate China's intent to redress historical Western bullying.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, China made a detailed claim in front of the UN describing its "9-Dashed Line" interpretation of SCS boundaries.<sup>71</sup> China also claims this boundary on all internal maps and Chinese passports as a definitive statement of Chinese sovereignty.<sup>72</sup> In an attempt to drive a wedge between the United States and its regional allies, China also frequently cites U.S. reluctance to intervene in Syria and Ukraine as proof that the United States is an unreliable partner, thus setting up China as the natural alternative security partner of choice.<sup>73</sup>

China is also waging a form of "lawfare" by employing law enforcement assets to warn off and bully competitor oil companies and fishing fleets in the SCS.<sup>74</sup> China has used its law enforcement ships—the region's largest and most capable—to physically interdict, collide with, and coerce its neighbors' smaller vessels; thereby leaving the dilemma of acquiescence or escalation in the hands of its opponents.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, by demonstrating quasi-legal control over significant portions of the South and East China Seas, China hopes to establish irreversible facts on the ground.<sup>76</sup>

Finally, the United States has observed considerable Chinese activity in the cyber and espionage realms.<sup>77</sup> U.S. organizations and networks appear to suffer significant cyber penetration, which allows China to stay ahead of U.S. Government and commercial decision-makers, reduces its strategic uncertainty, and mitigates risk.<sup>78</sup> For example, non-attributable cyber intrusion and espionage greatly lower the costs of Chinese research and development by reaping the classified and/or proprietary knowledge of U.S. defense laboratories and businesses. This eliminates the normal attendant investment and operating costs associated with research and development.<sup>79</sup> The Chinese cyber capability also allows them to influence adversaries by showing China's cyber reach and disruptive and destructive cyber capability.<sup>80</sup>

China's comprehensive gray zone approach uses indirect methods and ambiguous international legal frameworks to pursue revisionist ambitions. These activities have set China on a trajectory toward effectively contesting U.S. regional dominance and an active renegotiation of the U.S.-led international order.<sup>81</sup> As such, it constitutes the most sophisticated and classically dangerous of this study's four competitor archetypes.<sup>82</sup>

## CURRENT U.S. AND PARTNER APPROACH: WALK SOFTLY AND HOPE FOR THE BEST

While the United States has taken some assertive actions in the region, it has generally been cautious in dealing with Beijing. This cautious U.S. approach includes a host of actions spanning the instruments of power. Diplomatically, the United States has attempted to strengthen alliances and partnerships in the region, successfully enlisting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in promoting freedom of navigation. The United States has publicly sided with Japan and their claims to administer governance over the Senkaku Islands, clearing up what has been ambiguity in its position on the mat-

ter. However, the United States remains silent and mostly ambiguous in its position on territorial claims in the SCS. Failing to take sides when those claims meet the standards of international law seems only to embolden China to continue its regional irredentist activities.

Economically, the United States has championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) as a solid trade agreement to help counter China's economic influence in the region, but the sluggish process of passing TPP in the U.S. Senate threatens to undermine what could be a critical economic lever.<sup>83</sup> Militarily, the United States has been a persistent presence in the region. However, while it maintains numerous strategic bases in and around Northeast Asia and the East Asian Littoral, it has less consistently used these bases to operate with purpose in and around Chinese interests and claims. In a word, U.S. forces have not normalized or routinized operations with respect to China in ways that send clear messages about the limits of China's claims. Given the option of operating and assuming risk, U.S. leadership has instead consistently opted to avoid escalation at virtually any cost.

Information may be China's least effective lever. This may offer opportunities for U.S. gray zone exploitation. The Chinese have exposed weaknesses in three areas. All three-exhibit potential as focus points for information campaigns targeting PRC legitimacy as a reliable and responsible power. First, China fails to recognize long-standing and widely accepted standards for international maritime law.<sup>84</sup> Second, China's poor human rights record exposes it to severe criticism on major issues involving political leadership.<sup>85</sup> Finally, recent environmental problems involving air quality in Chinese cities, along with depleted fishing reserves and damaged coral reefs in the SCS present dilemmas for a Beijing Government intent on being recognized as a responsible great power.<sup>86</sup> In all three areas, the United States has opportunities to demonstrate its commitment to the extant global order in a way that undermines Chinese leverage.

## RISK – GIVE AN INCH, TAKE AN OCEAN

Risks with respect to U.S.-PRC military relations are manifest. There are significant risks of inaction due to missed opportunities to clarify U.S./partner redlines.<sup>87</sup> For example, in areas where the United States has sent clear signals like the Japanese Senkaku Islands, the Chinese have not proceeded with the same island building approaches they undertook in the SCS.<sup>88</sup> However, when the United States does not clearly stand firm on its interest in freedom of navigation elsewhere, it abdicates at least some of the legitimacy narrative to China and reduces allied and partner confidence in U.S. commitment.<sup>89</sup> In addition, there is abundant risk of action due to potential errors in military operations and the attendant potential for unwanted escalation.<sup>90</sup>

A great number of the aforementioned hazards are in fact emerging, eroding U.S. and partner confidence, and contributing to a regional arms race.<sup>91</sup> This has increased the overall prospect for escalation to open hostilities in the South or East China Seas.<sup>92</sup> This is less likely to emerge from purposeful and open Chinese military aggression and more because U.S. treaty allies and regional partners, facing a daily gray zone agitation by China, will lose patience or discipline at the tactical or operational level—triggering an uncontrolled and unwanted military escalation.<sup>93</sup>

If the United States fails to compete effectively in the gray zone, it hazards ceding power, initiative, and influence in the Asia-Pacific region, putting vital national security interests in jeopardy. Though China is pursuing a calculated strategy using all instruments of national power, the United States is more than capable of producing immediate and non-escalatory options to counter China's gray zone activities and maintain a position of gray zone advantage.

## VII. RE-ENTER THE BEAR – THE NEW RUSSIAN HYBRID THREAT

“A great wind is blowing, and that gives you either imagination or a headache.”<sup>94</sup>  
—Catherine the Great

### TRUMPED BY A HYBRID SPOILER

Like China, Russia is a driven and capable revisionist challenger. Of late, it has routinely demonstrated an ability to effectively assert significant influence by identifying and exploiting opportunities. Most often, these opportunities emerge in the failure (e.g., Syria) or vulnerability (e.g., Georgia and Ukraine) of others. Russia adapts to these conditions and seizes on their attendant opportunities by innovatively combining traditional and non-traditional coercive methods and capabilities with an often-masterful manipulation of conditions in the political, economic, and information domains.

Renewed Russian influence has come about largely with Vladimir Putin’s rise and consolidation of power. Putin has officially or unofficially ruled Russia since 1999, serving as both President and Prime Minister. In Putin’s 17-years in power, Russia has moved decisively from the depths of Cold War failure to the increasing heights of resurgent and influential trans-regional power.

Indeed, renewed Russian assertiveness is the hallmark of Putin’s leadership tenure. That assertiveness has manifested in myriad forms of aggressive and competitive behavior along Russia’s periphery and beyond. These behaviors range from hybrid military action in the Russian near abroad (Georgia and Ukraine) through manipulation of European energy supplies and coercive information campaigns against neighboring states.<sup>95</sup>

While much of Russia’s recent adventurism has triggered adverse U.S./Western responses, the responses have largely been limited to rhetorical protests, symbolic military gestures, and economic sanctions.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, in all cases, Russia’s activities have both remained well below the West’s vague threshold of unambiguous provocation and have also occurred in the shadow of Russia’s latent destructive and disruptive military potential. Therefore, all of its actions have yet to trigger more aggressive and, by implication, more risk-laden responses.

To date, Russia holds too many powerful trump cards for risk-conscious Western policymakers. Russia’s lurking nuclear and conventional military capability, as well as

#### Strategic Insights – Re-Enter the Bear

- Russia is a driven and capable revisionist challenger. It asserts influence by identifying and exploiting opportunities through innovative combinations of traditional and non-traditional methods and capabilities.
- Russia integrates multiple non-military instruments with the hybrid application of sanctioned violence and military power to exploit U.S./European vulnerabilities in a graduated gray zone approach.
- The U.S. and allied responses to Russian gray zone activism are more reactive than proactive.
- Risk of action/inaction appear equally unpalatable. However, failure to act assertively to shore up alliance strength and durability hazards seeing NATO fail decisively.

its control over important high-demand commodities and lines of communication afford it significant latitude in pursuing interests without fear of meaningful consequences. To date, it has run right up against key U.S. and allied redlines but has not yet decisively breached them. This will no doubt incentivize continued probing by the Putin regime.

Without question, Russian adventurism challenges U.S. standing in Europe. To the extent its aggressive behavior continues absent what it perceives to be meaningful and effective U.S. and European responses, it is likely to undermine NATO's long-term credibility as well.

## STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT – LONG GRAY ROAD TO REVIVAL

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe, and the rise of the power and influence of the European Union (EU)—all byproducts of Soviet Cold War failure—have defined Russia's contemporary decision-making environment. Recent Russian history had a profound impact on Vladimir Putin. So much so that in 2005, he called the Soviet Union's collapse “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century.”<sup>97</sup>

In light of this perspective, Putin's strategy appears aimed at reversing Russia's decline, establishing it as Eastern Europe's dominant power, and returning Russia to a global standing on par or competing with the world's other great powers. Toward that end, and 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has moved decisively to advance all three goals. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has restored a functioning (if somewhat fragile) economy and it has rebuilt its military into a more modern and capable force. On both counts, the Russians themselves recognize there is much more to accomplish.<sup>98</sup>

The steps so far are consistent with Russia's ultimately realizing what Leon Aron calls “the Putin Doctrine.”<sup>99</sup> According to Aron, the Putin Doctrine consists of three primary foreign policy goals. The first is maintaining Russia as a nuclear superpower. The second sees Russia attaining and being recognized as a great power in all facets of its international activity. Finally, the third sees Russia achieving and maintaining political, military, and economic hegemony over its near abroad.<sup>100</sup>

The third and final component creates the greatest uncertainty and instability; Russia appears to be seeking revival of former Soviet aspirations under new leadership. One aspect of this Soviet revivalism is traceable to the early 1990s.

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's nascent post-Soviet military strategy *Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation* (November 1993) set the stage for Russian adventurism in its near abroad. It explicitly called for “the introduction of Russian forces into newly sovereign states if perceived ‘suppression’ of Russian minorities occurs.”<sup>101</sup> Even today, this theme is a consistent cover for Russian gray zone activity along its periphery.<sup>102</sup> In addition, as it ostensibly protects the minority rights of at-risk Russian expatriates through influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression, it also progressively extends the reach of the Russian state well beyond its frontiers.

Like China, Russia has largely pursued its more ambitious objectives through gray zone competition and conflict. It employs some combination of premeditation and opportunism in all of its endeavors, at times seeming to deliberately move step-by-step and at other times, seizing opportunities afforded by target states and populations. What is clear, however, is that Russia intentionally adapts its approach over time to accommodate changing conditions and maintain advantage.

Andrei Tsygankov argues that Putin pursued a course of pragmatic cooperation with the West early in his tenure as President.<sup>103</sup> Toward that end, Russia entered into mutually beneficial bilateral partnerships with the United States and many of its European partners. This ultimately provided the oxygen for Russia's eventual post-Cold War economic and military revival.

Tsygankov concludes that the more cooperative Russian tone and approach toward the United States changed around 2005 as it embarked on a much more aggressive and assertive path.<sup>104</sup> Russia's growing economy, built on high oil prices and European petrochemical demand, provided the means for even more rapid economic growth and a transformation of Russia's hobbled military forces.<sup>105</sup>

Along the way, Russia devised new ways to counter Western conventional military power. In particular, it learned from U.S. successes in the various American post-Cold War conflicts; from the Persian Gulf War (1991) to the early, purely military, successes of U.S. forces in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003).<sup>106</sup> Russia's new approaches have at times even extended into the taboo territory of nuclear weapons as well. For example, Putin recently issued threats of nuclear attack against states that dared interfere with pursuit of Russian objectives.<sup>107</sup> This new assertive approach ultimately set the stage for Russian hybrid intimidation and aggression in Georgia, Estonia, and Ukraine.

### Russia's Gray Zone Approach – The Gerasimov Model.

In recent years, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to integrate multiple non-military instruments with the hybrid application of sanctioned violence and military power to achieve its most important policy objectives. Contemporary theorists characterize Russia's military strategy as hybrid warfare. According to Frank Hoffman, hybrid warfare "incorporate[s] a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."<sup>108</sup> It is hybrid because it is the cocktail-like application of a variety of coercive methods. It is gray because it lies in the space between the various classical American categorizations of armed conflict. It is neither traditional, unconventional, nor irregular by itself, but instead, all three in combination.

Beginning in 2013, General Valery Gerasimov – another key figure in Russia's strategic evolution and Chief of the Russian General Staff – began to comment publicly on his concept for 21st-century Russian hybrid warfare. The now commonly cited "Gerasimov Model" is a veritable playbook for purposeful gray zone competition and conflict. Gerasimov argues that the lines between war and peace are now blurred.<sup>109</sup>

In written work, the General cites the events of the Arab Spring as emblematic of a 21st-century evolution in the course and conduct of warfare.<sup>110</sup>

Gerasimov asserts that “the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals...have exceeded the power of [the] force of weapons in their effectiveness.”<sup>111</sup> Gerasimov pays particular attention to the role of information conflict and special operations forces (SOF) that afford new levels of deniability to purposeful combatants.<sup>112</sup> Overall, Gerasimov recognizes a shift in the character of warfare away from the traditional application of conventional military forces toward non-traditional and more hybrid forms of conflict. In Gerasimov’s design, conventional forces are reserved “primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”<sup>113</sup>

Two recent conflicts demonstrate how Russia has become comfortable as an assertive gray zone competitor, employing hybrid war as its instrument of choice. In 2008, well before Gerasimov described his understanding of modern warfare, Russia and the former Soviet Republic of Georgia engaged in armed conflict for 5 days. Russia’s strategic objectives in Georgia focused on protecting pro-Russian separatist populations and the dissuasion of Georgian entry into the NATO alliance.

During the short conflict, Russia combined traditional military formations with local separatist guerrillas and an aggressive information line of effort.<sup>114</sup> In advance of actual hostilities and consistent with Gerasimov’s description, Russia set conditions in Georgia by maintaining forces there for years under the guise of peacekeeping and humanitarian operations. For example, 1 week before hostilities commenced, Russia completed repairs to 54 kilometers of railway in Georgia allegedly in support of humanitarian assistance.<sup>115</sup> Other evidence references the surge of Russian journalists that arrived in the South Ossetian capital in order to “cover something big.”<sup>116</sup> The apparent sophistication in preliminary coordination makes it clear that the Russians employed a combination of military and non-military means without tripping over one or more Western redlines.

Starting in 2014, Russia showed even more sophistication in combining “economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures” in its annexation of Crimea and its hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>117</sup> In both cases, Russia bolstered ethnic Russian resistance forces with the targeted introduction of its own special forces.<sup>118</sup> Further, in Ukraine it has selectively employed Russian conventional forces as combat multipliers both from over the horizon, as well as within Ukrainian territory itself.<sup>119</sup>

The war in Ukraine continues today. It pits Russia and pro-Russian separatists on one side against the Ukrainian Government on the other.<sup>120</sup> In line with Gerasimov’s model, Russia applies a clever combination of military and non-military capabilities “in coordination with the protest potential of the population” creating game-changing coercive capabilities under a thin but plausible veneer of deniability.<sup>121</sup> Until December 2015, Putin persistently denied a Russian military presence of any stripe in either Crimea or Ukraine. He finally did acknowledge a modest Russian military presence in both cases but only after it was both impossible to deny and improbable that anyone outside the theater would act to dislodge them.<sup>122</sup>

## Current U.S. and Partner Approach – Steady and Slow Wins the Race?

To date, the U.S. and allied responses to Russia’s assertive hybrid form of gray zone conflict are more reactive than proactive. Since the beginning of the conflict in Crimea and Ukraine, the United States has demonstrated its support to Ukraine and to its NATO

allies through Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE (OAR). OAR is certainly a response. However, it largely leverages many existing regional military engagement and security cooperation programs while also demonstrating the need to understand better the risk of action versus inaction.<sup>123</sup>

The broad objectives of OAR include “demonstration of [the United States’] continued commitment to the collective security of NATO and dedication to the enduring peace and stability in the region.”<sup>124</sup> OAR recently caused the United States to shift more emphasis to the Atlantic Alliance and wider European security cooperation. This includes increased interaction with Ukraine, largely in the form of training and general security assistance.<sup>125</sup> However, “security cooperation” as a concept is routinely perceived as a peacetime activity, and is not generally done in the shadow of an active and urgent contingency threat, like that emerging in Eastern Europe.

A key objective of OAR is demonstrating U.S. commitment to its partners. Specifically, the United States is “conducting military exercises and training...while sustaining a rotational presence across Europe.”<sup>126</sup> To accomplish this goal, the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) is bolstering the infrastructure and logistics that enable NATO military operations across Eastern Europe.

The United States has dedicated specific assets to accomplish its OAR objectives. In 2015, Congress and the President created the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI), funded by a \$985 million appropriation. The President’s budget request for fiscal year 2017 included an increase of \$3.4 billion in ERI funds. Additionally, the United States has committed military support to several NATO allies in the region.

One form of support includes placing 250-pieces of armored military equipment between Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Romania.<sup>127</sup> A variety of Army, Navy, Air Force, and Special Forces units are supporting the exercise and training activities specific to OAR as well. Further, the United States announced that it would begin maintaining a deployed armored brigade combat team in Eastern Europe on 9-month rotations beginning in fiscal year 2017.<sup>128</sup> While OAR appears to be a solid first step at promoting peace, stability, and cooperation across NATO, an armored brigade spread across thousands of kilometers of Eastern Europe is more of a symbol than a credible military deterrent.

While OAR is primarily a military response, the United States is implementing other measures across the U.S. Government. For example, it is actively reinforcing existing diplomatic partnerships in Europe, first with very public commitments to all 28 NATO members. In addition, the United States supported the Minsk II Protocol, the second ceasefire agreement between Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatists. Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany co-authored the agreement in February 2015.<sup>129</sup>

In the economic domain, the United States, in partnership with the EU, initiated a series of economic sanctions against Russia in March 2014 to send a strong message to the Russian Government of the consequences associated with threatening the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> While the effects of sanctions take time, the swift action by the President reinforced the message that Russian aggression against Ukraine violates the rules-based international order that the United States and its allies fought hard to establish and seek to maintain.

The United States is engaging more forcefully in the information realm as well. U.S. national leadership placed Russia's aggression into Ukraine at the top of their talking points for some time after the crisis began. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter conducted a press conference at NATO Headquarters in Brussels on October 8, 2015, during which he stated that Russia "must stop its aggression in eastern Ukraine, end its occupation and attempted annexation of Crimea, and live up to its commitments under the Minsk agreements."<sup>131</sup> However, Russia's entry into Syria in 2015 shifted the conversation away from Ukraine, highlighting the challenge that the United States has in dominating a particular narrative in the information environment.

While conservative in scope so far, the United States is attempting to pursue an integrated strategy. For now, it favors diplomatic and economic levers, as well as limited security assistance over a more assertive demonstration of military capability. However, it is attempting to weave actions and prospective options into a consistent and credible information narrative. Russia's assertive approach rests squarely in the uncertain space between traditional definitions of war and peace and continues to challenge the U.S. ability to adapt. The more the United States adheres to a traditional playbook, the more likely Russia will continue to experience significant success.

## Risk – Divided and Conquered?

Given the recent aggressive nature of Russian behavior in Eastern Europe coupled with Russia's latent threat to the physical security and integrity of the NATO alliance and its member states, the stakes involved in actively meeting and turning back Russian gray zone competition are inherently high. Risk of U.S. action in this environment is defined mostly by the potential for significant, rapid escalation, with the most obvious and dangerous threat being nuclear war. Short of nuclear war, the United States and NATO risk entering into a costly conventional conflict with Russia under conditions of potential local advantage for Russian forces.

For example, Russia can make entry and effective operations in its border and coastal regions very problematic. Once in theater, U.S. and allied forces would confront a complex and challenging operating environment. Russia boasts enough sophisticated capabilities in the area of air and missile defense, ballistic and cruise missiles, SOF, and broad conventional land, air, and sea assets to make effective operations perilous for U.S. and allied forces.

Risk of U.S. inaction is equally high. The U.S.-NATO alliance has served to protect most of Europe from Soviet or Russian aggression effectively since World War II. Russia is effectively challenging alliance integrity for the first time through corrosive hybrid resistance to its reach and influence. Failure to act assertively to shore up alliances, strengths, and durability, hazards seeing NATO fail decisively. Operation ATLANTIC RESOLVE has obvious limitations in this regard.

Russia has effectively identified and is currently exploiting U.S. and allied vulnerabilities in Eastern Europe to achieve many of its most important strategic objectives. The "Gerasimov Model" provides key insights into the Russian gray zone playbook, and Russia's recent conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine provide evidence of that playbook in action. U.S. decision-makers can find effective counters to Russian hybrid

approaches; however, doing so will require significant adaptation of the lenses through which we assess the Russian challenge and the tools and concepts we develop and employ to counter it.





## VIII. THE UNTAMED LION – IRAN’S 40 YEAR GRAY ZONE CAMPAIGN

“The arrow shot by the archer may or may not kill a single person. . . . But stratagems devised by wise men can kill even babes in the womb.”

— Kautilya<sup>132</sup>

### THE GRAY ZONE PROBLEM

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is a consummate revisionist actor seeking advantage where the forces of rejection are crippling local authority. It both creates and exploits vulnerabilities in its regional and extra-regional adversaries. By doing so, it seeks to expand its reach and influence.<sup>133</sup> The IRI thrives by asserting itself into fragile—sometimes disordered—environments. This is no-go territory for most state powers, yet these environments can also favor bold and purposeful action. Iran has proven adept at advantaging itself through these circumstances.

In many respects, Iran is a classic revolutionary state in that it shields its own vulnerability by cultivating or advantaging itself in the weakness of others. At its core, survival is the IRI’s dominant motivation. In an assessment reminiscent of today, a 1979 Department of State report explained Iran in the following way:

It is clear that we are dealing with an outlook that differs from our own... Our [U.S.] character, our society, are based on optimism... Iran, on the other hand, has a long and painful history of foreign invasions, occupations, and dominations. Their outlook is a function of this history and the solace most Iranians have found in Shi'a Islam. They place a premium on survival.<sup>134</sup>

### A TRANSFORMATIONAL REBIRTH

The IRI was born in its current form nearly 40 years ago. Due to an inability to implement sweeping political, social, and economic reform, Shah Reza Pahlavi unwittingly set conditions for 1979’s game-changing Islamic revolution.<sup>135</sup>

Leading up to 1979, Iran served as one of the United States’ closest regional partners. U.S. decision-makers saw Iran as a moderate Muslim nation with enormous natural

#### Strategic Insights – The Untamed Lion

- Iran is a consummate revisionist actor seeking advantage where forces of rejection cripple local authority; it shields its vulnerability by cultivating or advantaging itself in the weakness of others. Efforts to create an Iraqi client are illustrative.
- Iran seeks to undermine its regional competitors by supporting partners, e.g. Hezbollah, that create instability. Concurrently, Iran seeks to create a physical buffer between it and the United States with a strong A2AD network and unconventional approaches to territorial defense.
- As Iran does not seek direct confrontation with the United States, defense choices lie with a U.S.-Iranian proxy war or with permanently removing the threat of a nuclear Iran.
- The U.S.-Iran dilemma embodies the uncertain risk-reward trade-off involved in gray zone challenges. Action-cooperative or coercive and inaction create near equal prospects for favorable and unfavorable outcomes.

wealth. They considered Iran as a linchpin for security in the Persian Gulf, as it was avowedly anti-communist. Iran had maintained cordial economic and security relations with Israel. Moreover, it demonstrated both the capability and will to employ its military forces against perceived communist threats in the region consistent with U.S. interests.<sup>136</sup> The Iranian revolution, the fall of the Shah, the rise of the Islamic Republic, and a long standoff with the United States over the fate of 52-U.S. diplomats during the Iran hostage crisis destroyed the U.S.-Iranian relationship virtually overnight. Since the crisis year of 1979, the United States and Iran have been locked in perpetual gray zone conflict.

Iran's successor theocratic regime has since discovered a modern animating interpretation of the "Persian Empire," and it pursues expansive and—from the United States perspective—destabilizing interests according to it. Because Iran's revolutionary leadership perceive the United States to be responsible for both installing and sustaining the former Pahlavi regime in power, they also persistently view the United States as the IRI's principal threat to survival.<sup>137</sup> Consequently, and in order to secure the IRI against perceived U.S. interference, Iranian leadership has prosecuted a nearly 40-year gray zone campaign to keep the United States and U.S. regional partners at bay.<sup>138</sup>

As a principal goal toward that end, the IRI has aggressively sought to prevent outside powers from again intruding in and attempting to dictate terms regarding both Iran's internal and external affairs.<sup>139</sup> However, hampered by decades of U.S./West isolation, the IRI faces significant obstacles in this regard. Principal among them are serious military limitations.

Iran cannot yet project conventional military power much beyond its frontiers.<sup>140</sup> While it may possess enough advanced military capability now (e.g. ballistic and cruise missiles and advanced air defenses) to impose real costs on an intervening external power, it cannot yet either secure itself totally against effective military intervention or employ its military at some range in a sustained campaign beyond its borders.<sup>141</sup> This situation may not necessarily endure. To the extent that Iran finds ways to increase its conventional power projection capability, its hybrid military potential will only increase.

## IRAN'S BEST DEFENSE – CREATE MULTIPLE DILEMMAS

Currently, Iran pursues its highly gray hybrid strategy along three supporting lines of effort (LOEs). First, the IRI engages in just enough high political engagement to complicate unified international opposition to it. It actively pursues mutually beneficial political and security arrangements with other broadly sympathetic revisionist actors like Russia and China in order to balance against U.S. strength in its backyard.<sup>142</sup> At the same time, the IRI engages directly with the United States and other Western opponents to gain some relief from isolation and sanction and, at the same time, splinters the unity among those inclined toward a more aggressive counter-Iranian position.<sup>143</sup>

Second, Iran actively supports regional rejectionist forces that are fast emerging from deteriorating order in the volatile Middle East and are at war with status quo Arab powers. Further, it bolsters a handful of state allies that are succumbing to the same increasing disorder. Iranian support for Shi'a militias in Iraq since 2003, Houthi Shi'a rebels in Yemen, and Hezbollah in Lebanon represent the former. Iran's support for the Iraqi and Syrian Governments is an example of the latter.

Iranian support for terrorists, proxy paramilitaries, and political opposition movements actively resisting the authority of avowed Iranian adversaries like Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Sunni monarchies creates one set of problems; whereas, IRI intervention against emergent Sunni-dominated extremist groups in places like Iraq and Syria creates wholly different challenges. In one case, the United States defends the status quo against Iranian predations, and in another, Iranian and American interests align and require rationalization. Iran's principal weapon in its secret wars is the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC)-(QF). The QF is Iran's most powerful, force multiplying, hybrid warfare instrument.

For a relatively small investment, Iran's terrorist and paramilitary clients and proxies—often underwritten by QF—effectively represent IRI interests while limiting Iran's direct exposure and liability. At times, these groups undermine and weaken other states.<sup>144</sup> At other times, Iran's unconventional allies serve as foils against the regime's strongest state opponents. For example, they discourage Iran's principal adversaries from costly intervention, promising excessive costs and indeterminate or uncertain outcomes as a price for interference.<sup>145</sup>

It does not appear that Iran seeks to establish client states. Instead, Iran seeks to undermine its regional competitors by supporting partners that create instability. Further, because these groups are cutouts for direct Iranian commitment, the IRI can plausibly deny direct involvement and mask their specific volition and intent.

A third line of effort involves the employment or threatened employment of Iran's significant unconventional and hybrid military and paramilitary capability. As highlighted previously, significant challenges exist for Iran in the area of conventional military capabilities and operations. Yet, the Iranians have found ways to offset their conventional military limitations with more unconventional and hybrid solutions. Iran has pursued a multi-track effort based on improving its conventional, unconventional, and strategic capabilities. Further, Iran has cultivated security relationships and is engaged in new levels of military cooperation with U.S. rivals Russia and China.<sup>146</sup>

In the purely military sphere, Iran has found ways to employ the inherent advantages of its geography to threaten U.S./partner power projection calculations, as well as the transit of global commerce through the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Iranian military strategy is predicated on three key pillars: "deterrence, asymmetrical escalation, and attrition warfare."<sup>147</sup> Over the last 2 decades, it has pursued military doctrine and capabilities focused less on defeating stronger adversaries and more on driving up their cost calculations.

Toward that end, Iran has dramatically increased important A2AD and counter-maritime capabilities to impose costs and limit U.S./partner freedom of action.<sup>148</sup> It boasts what former USCENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin called "the largest and most diverse ballistic missile arsenal in the Middle East."<sup>149</sup> In addition, its doctrine and capabilities for the defense of Iranian territory, waters, and airspace hinge on complex hybrid approaches that complicate U.S./partner military planning and drive up risk.<sup>150</sup>

For example, Iran is likely to leverage a combination of swarming small boats, sophisticated air defense, cruise missiles, drones, and matrixed irregular forces to create dilemmas for intervening forces.<sup>151</sup> The mix of Iranian military capabilities and the doctrine for employing them imply a focus on holding U.S./partner targets in the region

at risk via strikes from over the horizon or hybrid assaults while maintaining the capability to exact severe penalties on attempts to penetrate Iranian borders, airspace, and territorial waters.

## STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT – U.S.-IRANIAN DYNAMICS

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's pervasive sense of grievance and vulnerability dominate both its exercise of political authority and its national security risk calculations. IRI decision-makers are acutely conscious of Iran's past and still see the IRI as a perpetual victim of Western exploitation. According to Ambassador Ryan Crocker, "For Iran, there is no such thing as history; it is still the present."<sup>152</sup> Mindful of Iran's former status, Iran's leadership seeks to enhance Iranian regional and global standing and guarantee Iran's security from the perceived predations of those it believes are most committed to standing in the way.

There is a zero-sum relationship between Iran, the United States, and the U.S.'s closest partners and allies. Iran acts aggressively to shield the revolution and expand its reach and influence – often well-outside of the norms of the U.S.-led status quo. In response, the United States and its allies/partners push back against what they perceive to be illegitimate Iranian activism and, in the process, increase Iranian insecurity, perpetuate mutual hostility, and hazard vertical or horizontal escalation. The fundamentals for anything other than persistent mutual enmity and competition are simply not present nor are they anticipated to be present any time soon.<sup>153</sup> Thus, Iran's gray zone campaign is likely to persist and evolve for the foreseeable future. The deep-seeded hostility and mistrust on both sides of the U.S.-Iran equation are the products of important threads in Iranian history, Iran's unique post-revolution worldview, and the American intersection with both.

## NO PEACE, NO WAR – PERSISTENT U.S.-IRANIAN GRAY ZONE CONFLICT

A persistently high level of mutual insecurity is the best way to characterize U.S.-Iranian relations since 1979. For example, eager to counter what U.S. officials perceived to be a toxic (and potentially contagious) Iranian revolution, the United States chose sides in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. In the course of that conflict when the so-called "Tanker War" threatened unimpeded passage of petroleum supplies through the Persian Gulf, the United States re-flagged and escorted Kuwaiti tankers to safeguard them against Iranian attack. This at times resulted in hostile action between U.S. and Iranian forces. The Iran-Iraq War's unimaginable brutality and human toll – an estimated one million Iranian dead – only strengthened the new Iranian regime and intensified the enmity between Iran and the United States.

Americans have died at the hands of presumed Iranian-sponsored violence as well. In Lebanon (1983) and Saudi Arabia (1996), Iranian-sponsored terrorist surrogates in the Middle East attacked U.S. forces causing a devastating effect.<sup>154</sup> However, by and large, direct violent confrontation between U.S. and Iranian military forces has been the exception and not the rule since the late 1980s. Instead, the United States and Iran have engaged in "a kind of Cold War" over the last quarter century.<sup>155</sup>

For example, following the first American Gulf War, the U.S. pursued a very traditional politico-military “dual containment” strategy focused on limiting the freedom of maneuver of both Iran and Iraq simultaneously.<sup>156</sup> With the onset of Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, U.S.-Iranian tensions increased as Iran acted through proxies to complicate American military operations and manipulate political outcomes in its favor. Since the emergence of the IRI, Iranian leadership has employed similar forms of surrogate terrorist, paramilitary violence, and political agitation around the region (and world) as its principal instruments of power projection. Targets have included and continue to include the GCC states, Israel, and Yemen among many others.<sup>157</sup>

Further, in addition to an obvious interest in counter-extremism, much of the American security cooperation program with the GCC remains focused on countering Iranian conventional (and potentially nuclear) military capability. For their part, the Iranians have opted for a cost-imposing defense strategy that leverages ballistic and cruise missiles, sophisticated air defenses, and niche maritime capabilities (e.g., small boats, mines, and attack submarines). Iran also, until recently, maintained an opaque nuclear program that at a minimum threatened rapid breakout to full nuclear capability as an instrument of regional intimidation.<sup>158</sup> The United States has developed strategies to counterbalance Iran’s strategies by maintaining a robust U.S. military presence in the region, as well as arming U.S. regional partners with the necessary tools to minimize Iranian options.

## CURRENT U.S. AND PARTNER APPROACH—INCOMPATIBLE WORLDVIEWS

Contemporary Iran’s persistent search for security is the glue that binds and motivates all Iranian actions.<sup>159</sup> Since the revolution, every subsequent Iranian regime pursued two parallel LOEs toward a secure and prosperous IRI. The first concerns the perpetuation of the Iranian Revolution and focuses on security and active resistance to foreign interference.<sup>160</sup> The second concerns the future of Iran as an Islamic Republic and the long-term success of Iran’s Persian-Shi’i civil development model.<sup>161</sup>

The first of these has been the principal rub between Iran and the United States for nearly 40 years. In spite of U.S. unease about Iranian motives and intentions, there is remarkable consistency in IRI behavior on important aspects of international security: there is a cold rationality to many of its choices. U.S. and Western decision-makers often dismiss this point.

Iranian logic proceeds this way. The IRI will persistently act to counter U.S. regional influence and reach—principally to create more freedom of action for itself.<sup>162</sup> It will actively seek to threaten the physical security, authority, and legitimacy of its most potent regional rivals in order to enhance the prospects of it being recognized as the most influential arbiter of regional outcomes. It will also aggressively cultivate new or enhanced relationships with neighbors and regional partners as a deterrent against foreign (largely U.S.) interference. Finally, it seems to be actively seeking to expand its network of meaningful relationships worldwide in order to broaden its network of security and economic outlets.<sup>163</sup> On this latter point, it likely perceives that its future is secure to the extent it is indispensable to others.

All of these in either purpose or practice bring Iran and the United States into a condition of perpetual competition and conflict. Of particular concern to the United States and its partners is Iran's pursuit of regional dominance over the most important outcomes and the methods it employs toward that end.

Iran is obviously engaged in aggressive power projection by proxy around the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East region (e.g., GCC, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, etc.). This includes support for terrorists and paramilitaries threatening U.S. allies and partners, and commitment to regimes whose behaviors have proven fundamentally destabilizing. Further, its cost imposing hybrid military doctrine and capability present persistent challenges to the security of regional partners, unfettered access to and use of the commons, and U.S./partner military freedom of action. Finally, the profoundly destabilizing proposition of Iran as an aspiring hot or warm nuclear power challenges foundational tenets of the American-led status quo.

In response, the United States and its partners have employed decades of countermeasures ranging from diplomacy to military preparations and operations. The first involves economic sanctions against the Iranian Government and key Iranian individuals. The second path has been persistent positioning of U.S. military resources in and around the region. Finally, the third track has been marked by the effort to build partner military capacity in the region as a counterbalance to growing Iranian influence.<sup>164</sup>

To date, the U.S./partner record against Iran is mixed. Iran continues to threaten Middle Eastern stability almost whenever and wherever it chooses. The Iranian Threat Network (ITN) – consisting of the QF, Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and Iranian foreign surrogates – is invested region-wide. Syria remains propped up by Iranian assistance.<sup>165</sup> Iraq has fallen under Iran's sway after a considerable Iranian investment in its security.<sup>166</sup> In Yemen, Iran is free-riding on and fomenting disorder along Saudi Arabia's southern border. Moreover, in Lebanon, Iranian-client Hezbollah continues to handicap effective central governance in order to retain freedom of action. This last issue is most immediately threatening to Israel.

The recent conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's nuclear program clearly changes some of the U.S. calculus with respect to Iran. Many analysts presumed that Iranian pursuit of a warm nuclear weapons capability, at a minimum, was an insurance policy against U.S. interference and an instrument for regional intimidation. The JCPOA has presumably cooled Iranian pursuit for the time being and has effectively extended Iran's nuclear breakout time.<sup>167</sup>

In return, Iran will receive \$60 billion in unfrozen assets.<sup>168</sup> Iran will also gain access to the global economy for petroleum sales and weapons purchases. Of course, the devil is in the implementation details. For the United States and its Western allies, Iran is further away from nuclearization. However, Iran also is in the strongest position it has been in since 1979. The degree to which expanded engagement opens the door for Iranian moderation is an open question.

Understanding Iran and its unwavering quest for security is key. Recognizing how Iran pursues its security is useful as well. Linking Iran's blend of conventional and unconventional actions across the region presents U.S. decision-makers with an opportunity to see its gray zone problem more clearly. U.S. decision-making on Iran will remain challenging well into the foreseeable future.

## RISK: MANY CHOICES—EQUALLY HIGH RISKS

The U.S.-Iran dilemma is a classic demonstration of the uncertain risk-reward trade-offs involved in gray zone challenges. Action to counter adverse Iranian behavior—either positive or negative—opens the door to significant success in limiting the nature and magnitude of the perceived threat from Iran. On the other hand, most actions—diplomatic engagement, military action, economic sanctions, etc.—also have the potential to worsen or complicate American calculations.

The wager that is the JCPOA is a perfect example in this regard. Recognizing the unlikelihood that broad international sanctions would return once lifted in accordance with JCPOA, Iran might follow the North Korean model and serially violate the agreement terms on the margins to acquire a nuclear weapon or a near-nuclear breakout capability. Should that occur, U.S. decision-makers would face the unpalatable prospect of military confrontation with a nuclear-armed Iran or an uncontrolled regional nuclear arms race. The associated security dilemma and inherent instability would make the current standoff appear tame.

Opting against a diplomatic agreement, the United States may have attempted to maintain a sanctions regime. However, international participation and discipline with respect to sanctions would have been suspect. Continued Iranian pursuit of some nuclear capability likely would have engendered increased U.S. coercive military actions and economic measures against Iran. This time, however, with a more limited number of outside participants.

At a minimum, accepting this course would put the United States, a more limited number of partners, and Iran on a collision course toward hazardous escalation. While American conventional military capability would likely prevail tactically and operationally, U.S. coercive military operations would not be cost-free strategically. They may occur absent the consent of the international community, and there is a significant chance the region would end up with similar outcomes and risks as those outlined earlier.

Additionally, any more aggressive moves toward limiting Iranian freedom of action region-wide hazards horizontal escalation in areas where Iran activates its network of proxies against U.S. interests. Another concern is asymmetric escalation in theater where the Iranians engage in hybrid, cost-imposing military action inside the narrow confines of the Persian Gulf. Both courses of action rapidly begin to raise costs and increase risks for the United States. Thus, in many cases, the hazards associated with both a specific action or a level of inaction appear to be equally high and unpalatable. Enter the next phase of U.S.-Iranian gray zone competition.

## IX. THE SCORPION UNLEASHED – THE “BEGINNING OF HISTORY” IN A FAILING MIDDLE EAST

“I have witnessed the tremendous energy of the masses. On this foundation, it is possible to accomplish any task whatsoever.”

-Mao Tse-Tung<sup>169</sup>

### THE CONTEXTUAL GRAY ZONE CHALLENGE

The MENA region is chronically unstable and characterized by the increasing failure of state institutions. The authority of the region’s status quo governments is under relentless assault by motivated rejectionist forces. Arab governments in particular that had remained reliant on traditional tools of social control have found their control fundamentally weakened.

Furthermore, the coalescing stresses of persistent conflict, political revolution, demographic change, and globalization make those tools increasingly less effective at either inspiring or controlling populations predisposed to rejection.<sup>170</sup> In short, MENA has entered an uncertain period of radical transformation where governments and the governed are increasingly at odds and regional disputes will have worldwide implications.

Many MENA states are important U.S. partners in maintaining a stable and secure regional order.<sup>171</sup> That order relies on durable political authority – a concept that is an increasingly perilous position region-wide. Given the turbulent years since the beginning of the Arab Spring – with revolutions, near-revolutions, or contagious civil conflict in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia, Yemen, and Bahrain – all of the region’s conservatively governed states are at risk of sudden disruptive change. As important regional states weaken, fail, or fracture, malevolent state and nonstate actors fill the void created by disintegrating authority.<sup>172</sup> The state weakness, ungoverned or under-governed areas, and fraying social cohesion that follow are both crucibles for the emergence of violent extremism, as well as vectors for its viral expansion.

MENA is archetypal of a “contextual” gray zone challenge in that its profound complexity derives from the incidental and not purposeful confluence of actors and forces. It is neither traditional war where a clean and neat duality of opposing interests plays out in armed conflict nor is it an acceptable peace ripe for routine maintenance via engagement. Instead, it presents defense and military strategists with complex multi-sided conflicts rooted in myriad origins and between actors operating at radically diverse levels of sophistication, organization, and capability.

As suggested earlier, MENA’s menace largely originates from underlying forces that are for the most part beyond even the most powerful states’ influence and reach. Thus, MENA presents an even sharper break from defense convention than that suggested by the aforementioned purposeful state-based threats. If some gray zone competition and conflict is akin to war (as was argued at the outset), then it is accurate to say that the United States, its allies, and its regional partners are in fact at war with MENA’s environment itself, not simply one or more of the disruptive actors operating in and from it.

For example, while malign nonstate actors (e.g., ISIL, al Qaeda, al Nusra, Hezbollah, etc.) are manifest across the MENA region, they are not in reality the core problems.

Instead, they are symptoms of a more fundamental regional malady. Effectively addressing one challenge—even the most prominent—will likely not change the region’s overall security trajectory. In the end, effectively weathering and containing the most dangerous implications of MENA’s disruptive transformation is a more accurate characterization of the art of the possible.

Each gray zone challenge represents a unique and context-dependent contest for which U.S. Government processes and tools must adapt. To date in MENA, they appear wholly unsuited for the task. In most cases, the DoD is at the center of this challenge.

## STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT – ONE BIG REGION, ONE BIG PROBLEM

In response to MENA’s dangerous volatility, the United States pursues a comprehensive, whole-of-government approach to protect and advance core U.S. interests.<sup>173</sup> To date, however, the adopted course of action appears not to be keeping pace with the region’s gray zone challenge. In short and not unlike the profound unpreparedness American decision-makers and operators experienced post-9/11, the centralized and traditional approach to synchronizing U.S. Government efforts in MENA today is exhibiting significant limitations as well.

U.S. efforts have taken different forms in different countries. However, the U.S. Government has synchronized its efforts consistently across the region. Consistency, however, does not necessarily connote effectiveness. Broadly, the United States has sought capable partners to support its efforts. Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq provide examples of how the United States has acted through partners. Where legally able, the United States supplemented its partner capacity building efforts with standoff precision strikes against Islamist threats in the region.

A survey of some U.S. efforts in the following example countries illustrates the strengths and limitations of the American approach to date. The limitations draw attention to how the U.S. Government has struggled to adapt its policies, plans, and operations to MENA’s unique gray zone challenges.

### Strategic Insights – The Scorpion Unleashed

- A disordered and devolving MENA environment is fertile ground for the hybrid combination of malevolent state and nonstate actors.
- MENA is archetypal of a “contextual” gray zone challenge in that its profound hybridity derives from the incidental confluence of actors and forces.
- The MENA region is a complex adaptive system for which the United States will struggle for holistic and wholly rational responses. Unintended consequences and uncontrollable forces militate against U.S. strategic coherence. U.S. decision-makers face unsatisfying choices, such as endless counterterrorism, questionable partnerships and expedient damage control.
- Risks associated with future U.S. action or inaction are unclear but still daunting; both have already proven unsatisfying.



## **Yemen.**

In Yemen, the United States partnered with the Government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh as part of a counterterrorism strategy against al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. When Arab Spring protests began in 2011, the United States changed its position. After supporting a government transition, the United States backed Yemen's Vice President, Abd Rabduh Mansour Hadi, a replacement for Saleh.

Although the Yemeni President changed, U.S. counterterrorism policy did not.<sup>174</sup> After Houthi rebels from northern Yemen caused President Hadi to flee Yemen, the United States shifted its support to the Saudi-led coalition conducting combat operations in the eastern part of the country. The central theme of the U.S. support to the Saudi coalition was, and remains, counterterrorism.<sup>175</sup> In addition, while the coalition persists in conducting traditional military operations, within the chaos of current day Yemen, Islamic militants have multiplied and a central Yemeni government is far from re-establishing its authority.

## **Libya.**

In Libya, the United States began Operation ODYSSEY DAWN in March of 2011. The operation focused on "protecting innocent civilians in Libya and holding the Qaddafi regime accountable."<sup>176</sup> Following ODYSSEY DAWN and NATO's Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR, the Qaddafi regime collapsed.

In the aftermath, the United States re-established its embassy and supported Libya's Transitional National Council in its efforts to create a post-Qaddafi government.<sup>177</sup> With the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans on September 11, 2012, U.S. efforts waned. Largely confined to the embassy, U.S. activities in Libya have concentrated on assisting Libya's General National Congress (GNC) Government.

Following a breakdown of the Libyan GNC Government and a collapse of security, the United States evacuated its embassy in 2014.<sup>178</sup> Following the evacuation, the United States has supported conflict resolution between Libya's two competing governments—the GNC and the House of Representatives (HoR). In the interim, Libya's security situation has worsened and allowed Libya to become a haven for Islamic fighters, including a North African branch of ISIL.<sup>179</sup>

## **Syria.**

Syria presents another complex gray zone challenge. Syria still possesses a central government and has the overt support of both Russia and Iran. However, Bashar al-Assad's regime has lost control of large sections of the country to Islamist opposition forces of various stripes, and its defense of regime territory has created entrenched and metastasizing resistance to its rule. Assad's methods and allies have mobilized an uncoordinated, multi-nodal, and conflicted universe of Islamic opposition forces.<sup>180</sup> These capable groups—representing myriad points on the Islamist spectrum—are all actively vying with the Syrian Government and each other for a stake in the post-Assad era.



Through much of the course of the Syrian civil war, President Obama has maintained the position that Syria's future stability requires al-Assad's removal.<sup>181</sup> Unfortunately, the resiliency of the Syrian regime has prevented the realization of an acceptable political solution to the crisis. Meanwhile, large portions of Syria (and Iraq) are now under the control of the regime's most capable opponent – ISIL. Islamic State territory between the two countries represents the world's largest sanctuary for Islamic militants. Moreover, the United States finds itself tacitly operating against and on behalf of the Syrian regime as it conducts air and special operations actions against ISIL in both Syria and Iraq.

### Iraq.

Finally, U.S. policymakers did not anticipate Iraq's current dysfunction.<sup>182</sup> As both the deliberate instrument of Iraq's 2003 collapse and with many post-collapse options and tools at its disposal, the United States can arguably claim some of the credit for Iraq's emergent gray zone threat.

After withdrawing combat forces from Iraq in 2011, the United States remained somewhat passive while Iraq's Government became increasingly sectarian. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's actions created the conditions for the rapid re-mobilization of sectarian forces in Iraq.<sup>183</sup> Sunni militants used grievances against Iraq's Shi'a dominated government as an ISIL recruitment tool. As in the case of Syria, Iraq ultimately lost significant territory to ISIL and has yet to demonstrate both consistent and self-sustaining means to recapture it.<sup>184</sup> Consequently, as a function of its wider counter-ISIL campaign, the United States deployed several thousand U.S. forces in and around Iraq to train and support Iraqi forces, conduct precision military strikes, and conduct a limited number of discrete ground-based military operations.

Thus, both Iraq and Syria are now active fronts in the U.S. counter-ISIL campaign. Of the military instruments employed, U.S. air operations are the most robust. To date, counter-ISIL actions in Iraq are of a higher priority than those in Syria. The United States has conducted over half of its counter-ISIL airstrikes against over 16,000 targets inside Iraq's borders.<sup>185</sup> Despite stepped up U.S. efforts against ISIL, the United States remains wholly dependent on others – Iraq, moderate Sunni opposition groups, regional allies, etc. – to eliminate ISIL sanctuaries. To date, this approach has fallen short of expectations.

The MENA region will remain a challenge for the United States. The region represents a kaleidoscope of context-dependent challenges. Each MENA country and challenge can shift from manageable to unmanageable in relative short order. U.S. partners in one country or against one specific challenge may be adversaries in other instances. Escalation from stability to violence can occur rapidly. Due to shifting interests and power relationships in the region, the United States will experience uncertain partnerships and even more uncertain outcomes in MENA for some time.

### CURRENT U.S. APPROACH – “WHACK-A-MOLE” 2.0?

This report concludes that U.S. defense challenges in the MENA region are products of perspective and approach. The former stems from an inadequate or unsophisticated frame for understanding the more fundamental regional challenges and their impact on

DoD decision-making. In addition, the latter relates to the near-exclusive U.S. reliance on standoff and proxy action for durable results. In both cases, it is clear U.S. Government decision-making on the issues at hand can and must improve.

In each case outlined previously, U.S. policy has been non-predictive and inadequately prescriptive. The United States has yet to diagnose appropriately the scope and nature of its expanding MENA challenge outside of the simplistic counter-terror model that has driven U.S. policy since 9/11. MENA represents a malignant pan-regional crisis of authority. It presents U.S. decision-makers with a level of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity that far surpass that of the other archetypes covered in this report.

MENA will not conform neatly to the threat and response frames that have informed U.S. defense strategy to date. It is a violent, indeterminate, and potentially intractable social science problem with military dimensions. It is not a neat military science problem with an easily definable beginning and end.

To date, failures of imagination, anticipation, and remediation plague the U.S.-MENA strategy; U.S. decision-makers have failed to imagine the worst possible outcomes of disintegrating political authority. They have failed to anticipate the virulence of the darkest forces at work in the region, let loose by disintegrating authority. Finally, they have failed to act under a region-wide strategic design that recognizes the transformational character of the environment.

Consequently, purposeful MENA rejectionists have exploited the region's strategic context, the U.S. approach to that context, and the U.S. tools applied in that approach to pursue their ends. The results are predictable: circumstances in Yemen, Libya, Iraq, and Syria are worse and, thus far, stable states like those of the GCC and Jordan are more at risk.

U.S. preferences for standoff or over-the-horizon strike have yet to demonstrate a significant decrease in the extremist threat within or outside the region. For example, the target lists and target summaries associated with air operations to counter ISIL – dubbed Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR) – provide an easily quantifiable reference for the number of key leaders, vehicles, buildings, and infrastructure attacked.<sup>186</sup> However, they do not provide meaningful insights to the overall effectiveness of the campaign against a somewhat formless idea-based threat. They provide output vice outcome measures of performance – providing potentially meaningless context-free metrics and the potential for limitless interpretations. In reality, the effectiveness of OIR airstrikes will be determined when Islamic militants experience measurable setbacks.

A second and wholly understandable U.S. preference for others to do the heavy lifting to secure the region is laudable but inadequate. In Iraq, for example, the United States has expedited weapons sales and deliveries bound for the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). U.S. forces in Iraq have the primary mission of training Iraqi forces so that the ISF can defeat ISIL. Unfortunately, the ISF has yet to begin a major operation against ISIL, although there is some indication that operations to retake Mosul will conclude in 2016.<sup>187</sup>

In Syria, the United States tried to train moderate opposition groups but failed to produce a force capable of having any effect inside the country.<sup>188</sup> After helping to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya, the United States tried to build a capable partner security force but failed.<sup>189</sup> In Yemen, the United States had supported the Yemeni security forces with

hundreds of millions of dollars of assistance.<sup>190</sup> When Yemen collapsed, the United States shifted to expedited support for the Saudi-led GCC coalition. In all four cases, partner security forces were unable to establish or extend control consistent with U.S. interests. Predictably, in all cases, U.S. efforts foundered.

## U.S. GOVERNMENT IN ACTION – THE ISIL EXAMPLE

Since neither airstrikes nor security force assistance seems to be the antidote for MENA's complex security challenges, the United States has bolstered its security efforts with a renewed whole-of-government approach. The Islamic State, representing one of the most serious threats to security in the region, provides a good example of the current U.S. approach.

ISIL grew from the vacuum created by ineffective governance, institutional failure, and sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria. ISIL is first a rejectionist movement that liberally employs violence as currency to create a 21st-century caliphate out of the ashes of a failed Syria and Iraq. To date, ISIL has secured thousands of square miles of territory, terrorized populations, and created an oppressive and intolerant Islamic proto-state in the strategic heart of the Middle East.<sup>191</sup>

Until mid-2014, ISIL's violent expansion seemed to be a peripheral threat to U.S. allies and interests in the region. By 2015, ISIL's demonstrated reach, influence, and endurance saw it rise in prominence within policymaking circles as an urgent threat to U.S. national security.<sup>192</sup> The U.S. Government has since sought ISIL's defeat by "harnessing all elements of American power, across our government – military, intelligence, diplomatic, economic, development, and... [U.S.] values."<sup>193</sup> Toward that end, the United States leads a 60-plus nation coalition and follows a strategy based on nine LOEs:<sup>194</sup>

- Supporting effective governance in Iraq
- Denying ISIL safe haven through airstrikes<sup>195</sup>
- Building partner capacity for partner militaries to defeat ISIL<sup>196</sup>
- Enhancing intelligence collection to better target ISIL
- Disrupting ISIL's finances
- Exposing ISIL's true nature to undermine its message
- Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters
- Protecting the U.S. homeland
- Humanitarian support to displaced populations in Iraq and Syria

The counter-ISIL campaign and its LOEs are naturally long-term propositions. Unfortunately, ISIL's demonstrated ability to defy geographical limitations to inspire recent high-profile attacks indicates that the U.S. strategy will not necessarily limit ISIL's capability for strategic-level harm in the near-term.

As patience may expire well-before the strategy bears fruit, strategic innovation with respect to ISIL, and all of the various symptomatic challenges of MENA devolution is in order. Innovation may emerge from a more sophisticated U.S. diagnosis of the underlying MENA-wide crisis of governance and the yawning gaps in the secure exercise of political authority across the region. First raised in the wake of 9/11, the challenge of un-governance and under-governance remains fertile soil for endemic insecurity. To

the extent that this issue grows worse, more complex and virulent rejectionist forces are likely to emerge.

Further, innovation may also come from better integration of all the tools at the disposal of U.S. and partner leaders. Gray zone threats in the 21st century are first hybrid challenges, liberally mixing hazards across functions and domains. Responses to them should also be hybrid in character. In the case of the United States, this implies new approaches that seamlessly blend effects from the various instruments of national power.

## RISK – HIGH, TRENDING MUCH HIGHER

The United States has lost its decision-space-advantage in the MENA region. U.S. defense decision-making frames and processes are simply no match for MENA's diverse security challenges and their profound complexity. The two features combined create an uncertain strategic planning environment that highlights in sharp relief the risk dilemmas presented by both action and inaction as they relate to the region. MENA is gray precisely because it is impossible to identify, focus on, and pace against a well-defined and manageable set of defense-relevant challenges. In MENA, the environment and the trends driving it are in fact the principal adversaries.

Complexity in the MENA region means that any U.S. action has the potential to create even greater challenges for the United States and its partners. Further, the wide diversity of threat types makes first order prioritization challenging for senior decision-makers. MENA boasts a potential nuclear power with a penchant for destabilizing regional proxy wars; a series of state-killing civil conflicts; myriad extremist groups that emerge from and thrive on endemic regional instability; and generalized rejectionist trends that fast undermine the authority and reach of even the region's most capable states. Action against one or more of these will inevitably affect the nature and magnitude of risk associated with others.

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq is the first of many clear examples in this regard. In large measure, there is an expert consensus that the United States is where it is in Iraq and Syria precisely because of the deliberate collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime.<sup>197</sup> On a smaller scale, Libya and Yemen also demonstrate the risk of U.S. action. In a desire to improve its position, U.S. actions contributed to a collapse of both Libya and Yemen. This collapse led to a security vacuum followed by rampant instability.

A newfound U.S. Government appreciation of the risks of action have led it at times to embrace inaction or limited action in the region. In Syria, many perceive that U.S. inaction allowed the situation to worsen.<sup>198</sup> Further, it opened new unhelpful operating space for U.S. adversaries. Russia and Iran, for example, are perceived to have seized on U.S. hesitation to more actively aid the Assad regime.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, many argue that American passivity in the face of increasing violence and instability in Iraq between 2010-2014 highlight the hazards of inaction as well. During that period, a more assertive U.S. commitment may have limited ISIL operating space and prevented its de facto control over large areas of Iraqi territory.<sup>200</sup>

MENA's complexity combined with the perception of low returns on heavy U.S. regional investment since 2001 have seen American policy purposefully limit U.S. regional commitment. Consequently, risk has likely increased in some respects; how much and

to what end is actually uncertain. What is clear – absent unifying U.S. leadership – is that the region’s nations and competing interest groups will act according to naked self-interest. For example, in Libya, different Gulf States fund opposing militias. Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, and Turkey act independently to advance a narrow and immediate security-based agenda – often in conflict with one another and counter to U.S. interests.

As in the case of action, inaction has its own unique set of costs. U.S. Government inaction hazards sending conflicting signals to friends, neutrals, and adversaries alike. It flirts with unacceptable and irreparable loss occurring in the absence of U.S. efforts to prevent it. Finally, it cedes initiative to purposeful adversaries and contextual circumstances, both of which by choice or happenstance are unwilling to account for American preferences and thus, create greater risk for U.S. leaders to consider.



## X. THE ENDANGERED EAGLE – THE UNITED STATES AS A GRAY ZONE ACTOR

“Speak softly, and carry a big stick.”  
-Theodore Roosevelt<sup>201</sup>

### INNOVATION IN THE GRAY ZONE: 20TH CENTURY COMPETITION AND CONFLICT

Theodore Roosevelt is credited with saying, “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”<sup>202</sup> Roosevelt’s perspective sheds some light on two important aspects of this report.

The first is the report’s emphatic opening claim that the United States was once the world’s consummate gray zone competitor. Roosevelt was after all the first champion of U.S. global activism and that activism occurred before the United States possessed the comprehensive cross-domain advantages vis-à-vis other advantages it later enjoyed. Thus, to succeed, it had to rely on alternative gray zone approaches to realize its early aspirations for global power. The second is a reminder to current day decision-makers that paralysis in the face of gray zone competition is likely fatal from a strategic perspective.

In context, Roosevelt’s quote reflects a time when the United States began its hard won transformation from an isolationist and continental power to an expanding global power. Roosevelt is the first U.S. President credited with recognizing American potential as a great power and acting with purpose to achieve significant gains toward that end. The key quality that enabled Roosevelt’s effective stewardship of rising U.S. influence was his decisiveness. His decisive nature aggressively set the tone for a new era of exploding U.S. global competitiveness at the very time that opportunities existed for it to thrive.

Since the time of Roosevelt and until the end of the Cold War, history is rife with examples of significant U.S. offensive and defensive action in the gray zone. Indeed, the current U.S. global position is largely a product of past American gray zone success.

Today, however, the predator is the prey in this regard. Though American history is replete with examples of bold U.S. action in the face of imperfect strategic choices, there is a palpable reluctance to act boldly or otherwise in the face of gray zone challenges because of the presence of imperfection. An examination of the events of the last century – specifically, the actions of the United States as a gray zone competitor – may be instructive for current policymakers and defense professionals. Fighting or campaigning effectively in the gray zone may require some significant re-appreciation of the United States’ significant gray zone roots.

#### The Great White Fleet, the Panama Canal, and Dollar Diplomacy.

Much like today, the world at the turn of the 20th century was a marketplace for interstate competition between rising and declining powers, each vying for a degree of control over major outcomes in support of their national interests. Great Britain stood as the sole global superpower, its empire comprised approximately one-quarter of the

Earth's land area and nearly one-fifth of its population.<sup>203</sup> Other great European powers included Germany, Russia, France, and Spain. It was during this time that Japan and the United States began holding larger, global aspirations as well.

This study is defense-focused. However, as this study acknowledges early on, gray zone threats are not confined to the military sphere alone. The same was true for early 20th-century great powers. They faced their own unique blend of threats that combined military, diplomatic, economic, and informational pressures. Therefore, it is within this strategic context that the United States first learned to compete effectively in the gray zone against its most capable opponents.

Terms like "gunboat diplomacy" and "dollar diplomacy" accurately capture the gray zone approach toward expanding American influence in the early 1900s. It was—as it is now with purposeful U.S. gray zone competitors—all about skillfully integrating and applying all of the tools at its disposal effectively to generate meaningful advantage vis-à-vis opponents.

One example includes the "Great White Fleet," the significant naval build-up during the Roosevelt Administration that enabled the United States to employ naval power to secure its interests with newfound global reach. Additionally, Roosevelt's decision to sail a fleet of 16 battleships around the world between December 1907 and February 1909 sent a strong message to potential adversaries regarding U.S. naval expeditionary capability.<sup>204</sup>

The construction of the Panama Canal provides another example of U.S. skill in pursuing its interests via gray zone activity. In 1901 when Colombia balked at U.S. plans for a canal through Colombian-controlled Panama, the United States privately encouraged a revolution then openly backed it financially and militarily—principally via naval blockade. The Panamanian revolt succeeded largely because Colombia was unwilling to challenge the U.S. blockade and risk open war with the United States. Ultimately, the new Panamanian Government negotiated with the United States, extending to it control of what would become the Panama Canal Zone.<sup>205</sup> The opening of the canal in 1914 instantly changed the global economy and vastly increased U.S. ability to project economic and military power worldwide.

In the wake of Roosevelt's military expansion and as the U.S. economy grew, the Taft Administration (1909-1913) exploited both military and economic power to continue securing U.S. interests abroad. The United States invested heavily in Latin America and East Asia and backed up its investments with military might. This not only increased the economic reach of the United States, it also prevented other world powers from

### Strategic Insights—The Endangered Eagle

- The United States has a long history as the premier global gray zone competitor.
- Cold War policies provided the framework for and enabled persistent gray zone competition to secure vital U.S. interests.
- The United States is now in competition with actors who are using methods it previously mastered and employed to achieve great power status.
- The DoD is in a unique position to "lead up" and help restore a U.S. competitive edge against gray zone threats and challenges.

encroaching on important U.S.-dominated markets. This brand of “dollar diplomacy” was yet another intentional approach by the U.S. Government to expand influence and gain advantages over competitors in world markets.<sup>206</sup> Moreover, this approach largely occurred in the gray space that is the subject of this report.

### **World Wars and the Great Depression.**

The period between 1917 and 1945 included two world wars and the Great Depression. There was not a great deal of gray associated with the world wars. There was, however, a great deal of gray in U.S. activity before, after, and between the wars.

Indeed, it was through sophisticated gray zone methods that the United States was able to consolidate and capitalize on its wartime gains and expand U.S. influence through effective competition well below the threshold of major war. For example, Woodrow Wilson’s effort to establish the League of Nations in 1920 was an early attempt at establishing an American-led global status quo. Wilson was ahead of his time, as the idea of a U.S.-led, global order dominated successive presidential administrations since 1945.

It was only after the Allied victory in World War II that the world fully recognized the United States as a global superpower. Immediately after the War, the United States began constructing the very world order ultimately credited with countering and defeating aggressive Soviet expansion. The Soviet Union was, of course, a rival superpower. It also sought to capitalize on its post-war gains through skillful gray zone maneuvering. At the onset of the post-war, bi-polar rivalry between the two nuclear superpowers triggered perhaps the most dangerous period of gray zone competition in modern history.

### **The Cold War – The United States on the Cutting Edge of the Gray Zone.**

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States took a leading role in establishing the UN and the Bretton Woods economic system. This defined the rules of international relations, competition, trade, and commerce for 70 years. Within this framework, two key internal American policy initiatives helped set up long-term U.S. Cold War success.

The 1947 National Security Act and the policy of containment combined to provide the framework under which the United States pursued, advanced, and secured its most vital interests for the duration of the Cold War. The containment strategy and the institutions and tools that emerged from the National Security Act enabled a consistency of U.S. purpose and action over the course of nine presidential administrations. Although the United States applied this consistency of purpose and action against a single dominant threat during the Cold War, the circumstances under which American leaders employed it varied significantly over time.

The National Security Act, signed into law by President Harry Truman, amounted to a complete overhaul of the U.S. national security apparatus. It established the President’s National Security Council (NSC) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). It established the U.S. Air Force (USAF) as a separate military service and merged the Department of War (renamed Department of the Army) with the Department of the Navy into an overarching National Military Establishment (NME).

An amendment to the act in 1949 renamed the NME to the DoD, further unifying the military services. In addition to creating better unity among the American armed forces, the act centralized national security policy development and decision-making under the NSC and integrated the nation's intelligence gathering capability under the CIA.

The policy and authorities established through the National Security Act empowered U.S. leaders to better understand and address contemporary challenges. Further, the act allowed U.S. leaders to make timely policy decisions and take action in a unified manner against a broadly acknowledged, commonly defined, and widely understood threat to the United States and its partners within the most appropriate decision-making context.

Containment of Soviet ambition as a concept began with George Kennan's now famous 1946 cable from Moscow.<sup>207</sup> Kennan's "long telegram," later published anonymously in *Foreign Affairs*, outlined a policy of containing inevitable Soviet expansion with Western political, military, and economic instruments. At the time, Kennan's policy received criticism for being both too defensive in nature and for failing to differentiate between vital and peripheral U.S. interests.<sup>208</sup>

By 1950, Paul Nitze revised Kennan's containment policy and turned it into a national counter-Soviet strategy with *National Security Council Report 68* (NSC-68). NSC-68 provided the American President with a comprehensive look at the threat posed by the Soviet Union and offered various containment options for his ultimate approval. NSC-68 became a charter for significant increases in military spending, economic and industrial investment, and diplomatic engagement and alliances.<sup>209</sup>

The key decisions associated with NSC-68 shaped the global landscape for the next 40 years. Importantly, pursuit of containment forced the United States to navigate the gray zone by skillfully choosing when, where, and how to act in a manner that contained the most dangerous or destabilizing Soviet activities while still remaining short of Soviet redlines that could trigger open war.

U.S. Cold War strategy included a wide range of actions. These included elaborate information campaigns designed to expose the Soviet Union's worst intentions and abuses; economic warfare using embargos and sanctions to deny Soviet Bloc nations from Western technology, goods, and services; and a relentless military build-up of conventional and nuclear capabilities. Even large-scale wars on the periphery in Korea and Vietnam were key components of U.S. containment policy. All of these actions demonstrated a deep U.S. commitment to protect, at great cost, the post-war order it had established.

Unsurprisingly, the National Security Act further allowed for the legal conduct of covert action under the CIA's control. Congress passed a number of subsequent statutory actions to provide even greater explicit legal support and funding for covert activities. They provided the President with the authority to authorize covert action that was "necessary to support identifiable foreign policy objectives . . . and is important to the national security of the United States."<sup>210</sup> Through these and other related authorities, the U.S. Government continued to conduct warlike operations outside the normal scope of conventional warfare throughout the Cold War.

It is also notable that U.S. SOF began during the Cold War. SOF gave the United States a capability for low visibility and covert military operations that could, if necessary, avoid attribution to the U.S. Government or supported nations. The unconven-

tional warfare competency in particular focused on the preparation and employment of proxy forces to achieve discrete U.S. national policy objectives. Today, SOF's original function endures, as it is still required to "maintain and advance...capabilities for extending U.S. reach into denied areas and uncertain environments...by conducting low-visibility operations."<sup>211</sup>

As the Cold War progressed, the cyber domain emerged as an important theater of competition and conflict. Indeed, the United States was the first to define both the cyber playing field and the scope of potential gray zone competition and conflict within it. U.S. gray zone cyber activities date to at least 1982 with the mysterious explosion of a Soviet oil pipeline. The CIA was later identified as the culprit. Many analysts presume that the agency planted a "logic bomb" in the pipeline's control system.<sup>212</sup> That was 25 years before the "Stuxnet" operation that successfully slowed Iran's nuclear weapons development program.<sup>213</sup>

## RISK – GET BACK IN THE GAME OR GET ON THE SIDELINES

Great power competition in the 21st century – like that of the 19th and 20th centuries – is a contact sport. The rules and conventions change but effectively competing is the only way to thrive and win. The Cold War, in particular, is a useful reminder of the need to compete.

There was a consistency of purpose at the highest levels of U.S. decision-making through nine presidential administrations. That consistency of purpose flowed from the foundation laid in NSC-68. Containment was the U.S. gray zone vessel for responding to the Soviet threat and it endured as an animating concept for more than 40 years.

Throughout the Cold War – operating according to the conventions of containment – the United States creatively employed all of its resources in a gray zone campaign to limit Soviet freedom of maneuver, force Soviet decision-makers into unfavorable asymmetric competitions, and, ultimately, defeat Soviet power more by endurance, guile, and cost imposition than brute force.<sup>214</sup> Victory in the Cold War was a singular U.S. achievement.

There were dangerous redlines and trip wires along the way. Nuclear and conventional miscalculations, for example, were ever-present prospects. However, U.S. decision-makers skillfully avoided both. The United States and Soviet Union fought wars within the Cold War context, but never against one another directly. Instead, wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan became proxy battlefields for one or the other to bloody their competitor without engendering the very high cost of direct confrontation.

The United States is now a victim of many of the very tools that enabled its own past success. The U.S.-led post-Cold War order is under persistent assault from revisionist and rejectionist forces that are fast redefining the terms, character, and scope of consequential competition and conflict.

Purposeful revisionist actors are manipulating and maneuvering in the information sphere.<sup>215</sup> They are using political agitation and commercial activity as weapons. They often act through proxies. When they act directly, they innovatively employ civilian or law enforcement assets, intelligence, special operations, cyber, and space capabilities to change circumstances in their favor under the long the shadow of their more traditional military reach. They skirt redlines and sometimes cross them. However, they do

so conscious that the United States has a very low tolerance for the uncertainty of risk. In outline, this sounds remarkably similar to the American approach to the Cold War.

Other actors exploit the unrestricted maneuver space afforded by prolific rejection of traditional authority in key regions of the world. They often operate in the margins or alternate between legitimate and illegitimate motives and methods. They benefit from the incidental confluence of often-unconnected environmental trends. Consequently, they do not necessarily gray individually but instead blend into an indistinguishable gray whole when they combine with others and their environment.

In response to these broad trends in international security, the choices confronting U.S. decision-makers are imperfect at best. Faced with wicked strategic planning dilemmas and imperfect responses to them, U.S. decision-makers have recently erred on the side of caution.<sup>216</sup> This study finds that excessive caution appears at best to be a flawed strategic design. The past is prologue in this regard.

U.S. strategic leaders generally, and DoD leadership specifically, should take three cues from the United States' gray zone past. First, identify and define the principal character of the most urgent defense-relevant threats to core U.S. interests. There are many threats to American interests; those emerging from the gray zone do not always appear defense-centric at first. However, any response to them will all have important defense components.

Second, design a viable and adaptive strategic approach to confront, defeat, or manage those threats at acceptable levels of risk. Here, the DoD will be one of many important players in wider U.S. Government responses. The DoD can, however, assume that it will be responsible for leading, following, or underwriting all U.S. counter-gray zone responses. In addition, its planning culture may push it ahead of its counterparts in other U.S. Government agencies in taking on the gray zone challenge.

Finally, create a corporate culture that supports mechanisms and operational tools that will allow for effective campaigning against gray zone challenges. This requirement spans responsibilities for strategy development, military planning, and operational execution. If there is one overarching lesson from past experience, it is that understanding the competitive landscape, designing adaptable courses through that terrain toward strategic objectives, and persistently operating with purpose in pursuit of those ends are essential components of success.



## Study Outcomes



## XI. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. Army War College study team arrived at a finite set of key findings and recommendations. These represent the team's most salient insights on how the DoD might consider adapting to its newly recognized gray zone challenge set. In many cases, both the findings and recommendations are statements of principle. The study team suggests that these principles will provide senior defense leadership with touchstones for deeper examination over the forthcoming year.

The findings and recommendations are broken into two major categories. The first set covers national- and department-level policy and strategy. It represents the study team's judgments on issues that guide key DoD decisions vis-à-vis gray zone competition and conflict at the highest levels of the department. The second set concerns insights on operational plans and military capabilities. These provide the study team's best judgments on issues affecting the employment of U.S. military capabilities in gray zone environments and against specific gray zone challenges.

This report does not attempt to offer a specific strategic approach to any of the four competitor archetypes. Rather, the upcoming findings and recommendations represent generalizable response principles that the team believes capture the nature of gray zone demand regardless of origin and the tools and boundaries associated with the broad waterfront of available gray zone responses.

## POLICY AND STRATEGY

The following findings and recommendations provide ways for the DoD and national security policymakers to formulate strategic-level direction as it applies to gray zone competition and conflict. These findings should guide high-level U.S. Government deliberations on leadership and coordination of future U.S. gray zone campaigning.

## Policy and Strategy

## Findings-

- There is no common perception of the nature, character, or hazard associated with the gray zone or its individual threats and challenges.
- There is significant asymmetry in risk perceptions between the United States, its partners, and their principal gray zone adversaries and competitors.
- There is neither an animating grand strategy nor “campaign-like” charter to guide U.S. defense efforts against specific gray zone challenges.

## Recommendations-

- The DoD should develop a common, compelling, and adaptive strategic picture of the range of gray zone threats and their associated hazards.
- The DoD should “lead up” and develop actionable and classified strategic approaches to discrete gray zone challenges and challengers.

## Finding 1: There is no common perception of the nature, character, or hazard associated with the gray zone or its individual threats and challenges.

To date, the DoD has adhered to assumptions and planning perspectives that do not fully account for the gray zone as the study team perceives it to be now and for some time to come. When corporate U.S. Government convention aligns poorly with reality, strategy development and military planning will suffer. This is currently true for the U.S. response to gray zone competition and conflict. Consequently, there are real gaps in strategic design, deliberate plans, and defense capabilities as they apply to operating and succeeding in gray zone environments. In short, the United States has ceded initiative and advantage to gray zone competitors and competitive forces because of a corporate failure to grasp the totality of the challenges at hand.

The gray zone is not a specific defense and military challenge with well-defined parameters and boundaries. Instead, it is clear recognition of a universe of challenges lying in what amounts to conceptual dead space in strategy development and strategic planning. This dead space exists from the highest levels of the U.S. national security community to deep into the Pentagon's strategy and planning processes. Thus, what specifically gray zone challenges are is less important than where they are conceptually in the Pentagon's hierarchy of planning priorities.

In reality, the gray zone and its constituent challenges exist in parallel to the DoD's preferred "threatscape" and, thus, are never fully accounted for in defense strategy and planning. For example, three of four competitor archetypes covered in this report are represented in the "4 plus 1" threat construct outlined in the *The National Military Strategy*.<sup>217</sup> They made that particular 4 plus 1 list primarily because of their perceived hostility or potential hostility to U.S. interests and their assumed ability to threaten those interests with military action. In the study team's view, this is a prudent but insufficient and overly conventional perspective on the actual hazards of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian revisionist activities.

Further, according to the Pentagon, the "plus 1" includes VEOs like ISIL and al Qaeda.<sup>218</sup> From the study team's perspective, that is an excessively narrow interpretation of the defense and military implications of what is likely a more generalized trend toward rejectionism and its attendant threat to responsible political authority and security worldwide.

From a conventional U.S. defense perspective, the aforementioned revisionists represent contingency pacers and the latter rejectionists, near-term targets for elimination. This study suggests the reality is quite different. Revisionist China, Russia, and Iran, for example, are actively operating now against U.S. interests in deliberate campaign-like ways. The absence of a similar campaign-like U.S. approach in response opens even greater operating space for them to pursue and advance their interests. As a consequence, the United States hazards suffering warlike losses in the face of on-going gray zone competition.

Likewise, the recognizable manifestations of gray zone rejectionism are symptoms of a much broader systemic condition. In all likelihood, that condition will persistently spawn additional—more complex—challenges as grievance and hostile activism become increasingly net-centric. The implications of this for the DoD are significant and

will not be confined to counterterrorism. To be sure, the United States will no doubt face a persistent terrorist challenge. However, other forms of organized violence within and between important states and rival populations are an obvious prospect as well. It would be irresponsible not to recognize, understand, and account for the widest possible number of pacing conditions that might emerge as a result.

### **Finding 2: There is significant asymmetry in risk perceptions between the United States, its partners, and their principal gray zone adversaries and competitors.**

The study team found a broad consensus on the subject of U.S.-competitor risk perceptions.<sup>219</sup> In brief, U.S. decision-makers are widely perceived as hypersensitive to the hazards associated with potential escalation and as a result are more conservative in response to gray zone competition and conflict. An inadequate understanding of countervailing competitor redlines generates paralysis because U.S. decision-makers automatically perceive the risk of both inaction and action to be very high. As a result, they have been more likely to choose not to act and thereby defer the associated risk to either a more politically agreeable or a strategically unambiguous time. There is an operative presumption in this also that the situation may resolve itself before American intervention is unavoidable.

U.S. competitors, on the other hand, are perceived to be much more effective at calculated risk-taking. They persistently exploit U.S. risk sensitivity to probe for and seize opportunities. They engage in both gradualism and bold action.<sup>220</sup> Moreover, in both instances, their perception of U.S. risk-aversion, often confirmed by U.S. inaction, appears to encourage them to pursue bolder and more aggressive gray zone activities. The results of this apparent asymmetry of risk-perception are predictable—loss of initiative, ceded control over interests or territory, and a position of general disadvantage in the face of aggressive gray zone competition.<sup>221</sup>

### **Recommendation: The DoD should develop a common, compelling, and adaptive strategic picture of the range of gray zone threats and their associated hazards.**

Because gray zone competition and conflict sit uncomfortably between traditional conceptions of war and peace, policymakers and military strategists need new or newly calibrated lenses to assess demand, design strategy, and ultimately implement meaningful actions in response. The process of doing so will require challenging the very conventions that guided defense and national security professionals for decades.

As a start, rational strategic approaches to the broad front of gray zone challenges require a common, compelling, and adaptive operating picture.<sup>222</sup> This new perspective should adequately assess the current gray zone landscape, the likeliest future trajectory of its constituent threats, and the prospects for sharp deviations from current trends that might trigger a fundamental defense reorientation. This perspective cannot be insular and must account for the widest possible view points from the U.S. intelligence community and wider interagency, allies, and partners, etc.

The Cold War provides a helpful but binary example in this regard. While there were frequent disagreements among the study team about specific methods, there was



clear understanding of the nature of the challenge and the general strategic approach to confront it. It is reasonable to conclude that this was a result of a commitment on the part of the U.S. national security community and the DoD to maintain a deep and adaptive understanding of Soviet strengths and vulnerabilities. Today, the same is required against a much more complex and transformational set of challenges.

This report's archetypal revisionist and rejectionist actors live, exploit, and succeed in both the dead space between artificial extremes of war and peace, as well as the extant gaps in U.S./partner defense and military planning, concepts, and authorities. These gaps are now significant enough that the United States has opened itself up to substantial strategic-level risk.

Thus, it is extremely important that the U.S. Government and the DoD specifically acknowledge and persistently assess the implications of the new assumptions introduced in Section IV. Revisionist state actors are currently involved in deliberate counter-U.S. campaigns. The archetypes outlined in this report are illustrative in this regard. Their methods skirt and sometimes violate perceived U.S. redlines by skillfully avoiding overt provocation and manipulating risk perceptions to create cognitive asymmetries.

These revisionists often advantage themselves in the muddy water between traditional views of war and peace to obscure their designs, methods, and intentions. Further, they modulate innovative combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression to exploit the prevailing interests and risk-tolerance of their opponents. They do all of this both according to sophisticated designs, as well as through opportunism and hostile improvisation.

Likewise, nonstate rejectionists operating in the ungoverned and inhospitable terrain of networked hostility and failing authority are increasingly at odds with important but often vulnerable pillars of the U.S.-led status quo. They are mostly untethered from the traditional state system and draw strength from the corrosive effect of hyper-connectivity on traditional political authority and its mobilizing potential as a platform for physical and virtual resistance. They are gray in large measure because of how they coalesce in time and space to present U.S. decision-makers with complex security challenges. In addition, they ultimately present major warlike hazards and costs in the absence of a single unifying adversary or adversarial purpose.

The contemporary environment may be a more challenging puzzle than was the decidedly realist standoff during the Cold War. However, profound difficulty cannot be an excuse for abdicating responsibility or ignoring requirements. The United States' strategic approach to a multi-polar, hyper-connected environment—flush with strategically consequential actors and forces—has proven to be exceedingly vulnerable. New approaches to that environment are in order but cannot proceed from insufficient understanding.

### **Finding 3: There is neither an animating grand strategy nor “campaign-like” charter to guide U.S. defense efforts against specific gray zone challenges.**

There is no grand strategy or operating charter for U.S. counter-gray zone activity. Purposeful gray zone actors are persistently operating according to specific intent and design against U.S. interests. Further, the contextual confluence of forces in disordered

gray zone environments also exact costs in ways that are consistent with a powerful and purposeful design. In both cases, U.S. responses are overly reactive.

The United States responds to each new provocation or incident as if it were either the first or the last, whereas persistent resistance is in fact an endemic quality of all gray zone challenges regardless of origin.<sup>223</sup> Additionally, and consistent with Findings 1 and 2, most meaningful counter-gray zone activities occur late if at all in part because of the absence of a thoughtful strategic-level charter.<sup>224</sup>

The United States is reactive by virtue of both recent tradition and dogged adherence to its baseline post-Cold War assumptions. In this instance, the operative tradition is that of open and transparent national security doctrines. Meanwhile, the operative assumption at issue is specifically concerning U.S. competitors adopting, fighting, and losing according to American rules. Hanging onto both has placed significant limitations on U.S. readiness for gray zone competition and conflict. The first, however, has been a particularly unhelpful obstacle to chartering a meaningful counter-gray zone strategy. The challenge starts with the provisions of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act. Goldwater-Nichols requires the President to routinely develop and publish a *National Security Strategy* (NSS).<sup>225</sup> Over time and especially in the post-Cold War era, the NSS and documents like it were increasingly divorced from meaningful strategic planning as they became more public. Now, these documents are largely equal parts boastful recordings of administration accomplishments and aspirational statements of U.S. principle. They are certainly not deliberate and thoughtful articulations of strategy. They do not, for example, set tangible priorities; balance the tension between ends, ways, and means; or assess risk in a meaningful way.

In the Reagan-era and earlier, NSSs were generally classified and contained specific strategic objectives, concepts, and priority efforts for achieving those objectives.<sup>226</sup> However, since Goldwater-Nichols, successive administrations produced unclassified strategies. Further, most definitive statements of defense and military policy and strategy (e.g., *National Military and Defense Strategies* and *Quadrennial Defense Reviews*) are produced for public consumption as well.

Much of this trend is attributable to the fall of the Soviet Union. Suddenly alone as the world's only superpower, the United States enjoyed an immense freedom of action. The single-minded and narrowly focused Cold War strategy was now obsolete and a new era of strategic ambiguity ensued. There was ambiguity about interests, objectives, and threats. To be sure, there were a number of compelling threats on the defense agenda after 1991 (e.g., Iraq, North Korea, Iran, etc.) but they were naturally considered less dangerous than the Soviet Union.

Benefiting from overwhelming military advantage, the United States could live with this ambiguity for a time. Indeed, senior U.S. policymakers likely still prefer some ambiguity as it preserves freedom of action and leaves open the widest possible range of options. In the face of real threats, however, too much ambiguity can be detrimental to effective strategy development. The more ambiguous or amorphous the objectives, the harder it is to settle on the most appropriate strategy to secure them.

In light of the environment's complexity, the increasing polarity of U.S. domestic politics, and the uncertainty of U.S./partner political will, U.S. decision-makers will likely continue to value the flexibility offered by public, aspirational, and decidedly



ambiguous policy statements. However, the types of hazards presented by the gray zone challenges articulated herein may be changing some of that calculus.

The environment remains abundantly ambiguous in many important respects. What is no longer ambiguous, however, are the increasingly grave threats emerging from multiple sources of competition and conflict. Some national-level remediation is likely at hand.

**Recommendation: The DoD should “lead up” and develop actionable and classified strategic approaches to discrete gray zone challenges and challengers.**

Global leadership is no longer an assumed U.S. entitlement. If the United States does not reassert its leadership—especially against purposeful gray zone competitors—it hazards loss of control over the security of core interests and increasing constraints on its global freedom of action. Therefore, it is incumbent on senior U.S. leaders to deliberately plan in a campaign-like fashion to compete for primacy and defend core interests in the space where U.S. dominance is most at risk.

A coherent whole-of-government concept for combatting gray zone challenges would be ideal. However, it is likely not forthcoming. Thus, the DoD should not wait for definitive national-level guidance on countering gray zone competition before thoughtfully considering its own options.

Of course, it cannot act alone. However, with presidential approval, it can leverage its substantial strategy development and strategic planning capacity to design coherent and proactive strategic responses to revisionist gray zone competitors. Further, anticipating an increase in demands emerging from disintegrating authority, it would benefit from the same level of deliberation as it relates to countering rejectionist forces as well.

In the process, the DoD should also anticipate that discrimination and ruthless prioritization will become core operating principles across the U.S. Government as resources hold steady or become more constrained over time. Unfortunately, this will coincide with an expansion of strategic-level hazards and attendant defense requirements. Much of this expansion will occur in the gray zone. Thus, at a minimum, the DoD should endeavor to anticipate the tempo, demands, resources, and risks associated with the most dangerous and disruptive manifestations of persistent gray zone competition.

Gray zone competition and conflict involve a diverse array of distinctive challenges. Thus, any new defense strategic guidance addressing them cannot be one size fits all. The DoD should not aspire to one plan or concept for the gray zone as a whole but, instead, a playbook of plans and concepts tailored to the specific conditions that are unique to each prospective threat. Those plans should be readily adaptable to changing strategic conditions.

There are a handful of important characteristics for virtually any defense-based approach to gray zone threats. These include adaptable deterrence, U.S. presence and posture, mission-tailored U.S. forces, routine and targeted demonstrations of U.S. capability and will, enhanced partner resilience, cooperative security relationships, and U.S./partner inter-operability. Where U.S. interests are most acutely threatened, DoD strategy should focus on methods conducive to deterrence by denial, leading adversaries to conclude that no prospective concept of operation—no matter how irregular or

innovative—will succeed in the face of U.S.-supported opposition. Toward that end and in advance of adversary provocation, the United States should enhance partner self-reliance as a first line buffer against adversary opportunism.

Virtually all U.S. responses to gray zone threats will rely on assured regional access. Toward this end, U.S. force posture should underwrite cold-start military operations from within theater, as well as the contingency expansion of U.S. presence in extremis. Loss of access that isolates partners or allies is an unacceptable outcome. Further, as U.S. forces are globally employable assets, all posture must support both regional and extra-regional requirements, including key support contracts and en route infrastructure.

In the end, DoD decision-makers should recognize that asserting U.S. leadership in the face of persistent gray zone competition will not occur in a risk-free vacuum. Adversaries will resist and escalation will remain a persistent danger. As the DoD proceeds, all of its proposed strategic designs should cover the latent hazards of horizontal and vertical escalation. As it works through and arrives at insights on its gray zone challenge set, it must also factor its major findings back into the department's existing strategic-level guidance.

Development of classified defense-specific charters against gray zone threats will inevitably identify non-military concept and capability gaps. This may motivate broader U.S. Government involvement. At a minimum, however, it will identify key vulnerabilities that require high-level U.S. Government risk mitigation. In the end, success cannot rely on defense contributions alone. However, the DoD should be prepared to lead the national security community to that conclusion through detailed planning. Visionary planning symposiums like Eisenhower's *Solarium Project* are one route toward designing innovative new strategies to confront the most dangerous and disruptive gray zone threats while bringing essential non-military talent into the process.<sup>227</sup>

## OPERATIONAL PLANS AND MILITARY CAPABILITIES

The following recommendations highlight some ways for the U.S. military to transform concepts, capabilities, and operations to compete better in gray zone environments. While not the focus of this report, U.S. interagency processes may need similar enhancements to become a more viable supported and supporting arm in counter-gray zone campaigns.

### Finding 4: CCDR's presumptive future gray zone responsibilities do not align with their current authorities.

The geographic combatant command (GCC) CCDRs are accountable for the conditions they can touch in their area of responsibility (AOR). As such, they are on the leading edge of prospective U.S. defense responses to purposeful and contextual gray zone competition and conflict. This study concludes that gray zone competitors are in fact deliberately campaigning against the United States in and from the various combatant command (CCMD) AORs. Where threats are gray by implication, the environment is exacting campaign-like effects and threatening U.S. interests in and from those AORs as well.

This study also concludes that the United States is not coherently “campaigning back” in response. Additionally, high-level operational micro-management is possibly creating late, excessively constrained, and ineffective gray zone responses.<sup>228</sup> Competitors, adversaries, and competitive forces are operating against U.S. interests now. Effectively securing them will demand that the United States “operate” against them as well. A first step in this direction is affording greater latitude to the CCDRs/GCCs.

The Unified Command Plan outlines CCDR authorities.<sup>229</sup> On the surface, it appears that CCDRs have the requisite authority to operate effectively in the gray zone. The reality is quite different.

High-level U.S. Government discomfort with deliberate operations in the gray zone are byproducts of both insufficient senior-level appreciation of the nature of gray zone challenges, as well as the asymmetry of risk perceptions outlined previously. This study concludes that conservative risk tolerance results in excessive caution. It further concludes that risk aversion and excessive caution are the fruit of inadequate strategic assessments, insufficient strategic planning, and limited meaningful strategic guidance. All of these combined are the products of the artificial peace-war dichotomy operative within the defense enterprise. Together, these ultimately constrain CCMD freedom of action.

In much of the gray zone, momentum matters. Thus, CCMDs need greater flexibility to adapt to their theater strategic conditions and act to gain and maintain the initiative within their AORs. The team concluded that the CCDRs’ limited ability to act with due speed and purpose to respond to compelling gray zone threats and shape regional outcomes proactively against them was endemic to the current decision-making environment.<sup>230</sup>

## Operational Plans and Military Capabilities

### Findings-

- CCDR’s presumptive future gray zone responsibilities do not align with their current authorities.
- The current U.S./NATO joint phasing model is inadequate to seize and maintain initiative in the gray zone.
- U.S. concepts for the design and operational employment of force and forces is not well-adapted to persistent gray zone competition and conflict

### Recommendations-

- Empower CCDRs to “operate” against active gray zone competition and conflict with new capabilities and agile, adaptive models for campaigning.
- Develop and employ new and adaptable concepts, capabilities, and organizational solutions to confront U.S. gray zone challenges.

## Finding 5: The current U.S./NATO joint phasing model is inadequate to seize and maintain the initiative in the gray zone.

Purposeful gray zone revisionist actors are successfully campaigning and achieving warlike objectives inside the steady state or deterrence phases of the U.S./NATO joint phasing model. These actors define success as operating and gaining physical and political advantage with actions falling just under thresholds that might trigger effective U.S. and partner responses. Their approach to competition and conflict allow them to make substantial gains at surprisingly low strategic cost. Likewise, there are transformational forces afoot in the environment that are breeding complex organic rejectionist threats to political authority and security. Often these too run counter to core U.S. interests.

The traditional conceptions of peace and war have muddied the waters when it comes to recognizing emergent threats like these and neatly aligning them with doctrinal joint planning constructs. None of them, for example, conform to prevailing U.S. defense convention. Embedded in each is the prospect of warlike adversary success in the absence of what that same convention describes as war, as well as open hostilities arriving via cold-start and absent traditional indications, warnings, or military preparations. The latter circumstances might as easily arrive via miscalculation as they could from some deliberate choice on the part of one or the other of the opposing sides.

The U.S./NATO joint phasing model was designed to confront state militaries employing strictly conventional methods. In each of its manifestations, the study team found contemporary gray zone challenges to be anything but that. There is no beginning and end as suggested by the joint phasing construct. Further, purposeful adversaries are likely “dominating” while the United States and its partners are still “shaping.”<sup>231</sup>

Instead, the gray zone represents a persistent band of resistance to the U.S.-led status quo by specific opponents or opposing environmental forces. Action within that band fluctuates above and below a mean point of constant hostility. The band’s upper limit is open unambiguous conflict and the lower limit benign competition. Thus, it is reasonable that U.S. military forces operating within it must be prepared to adapt to and campaign against the unique demands associated with fluctuations above and below the mean.

The operative U.S. approach to joint campaigning is not consistent with this reality. The consequences are predictable—slow, disjointed, cautious, often episodic, and largely ineffective reactions versus deliberate, assertive, initiative-gaining campaigns. However, the Joint Staff has correctly identified this as a problem and is currently assessing existing doctrine—including the campaign plan-phasing construct—with the intent of updating it to better reflect current reality.<sup>232</sup> The extent to which they are able to break through DoD preferences and achieve real innovation are open questions.

### Recommendation: Empower CCDRs to “operate” against active gray zone competition and conflict with new capabilities and agile and adaptive models for campaigning.

To effectively buffer at-risk U.S. interests against the unique hazards presented by gray zone threats, CCDRs should possess the requisite responsibility, authority, and tools essential to achieve favorable outcomes that are in their purview. This includes



gaining and maintaining regional initiative against purposeful gray zone competitors, shaping regional security dynamics to limit those competitors' freedom of action, and containing those hazards that prove less immediately controllable.<sup>233</sup>

While remaining accountable to senior U.S. decision-makers, CCDRs therefore need greater freedom of action in contending with the gray zone challenges in their AORs. This would benefit first from the top-level gray zone playbooks suggested previously. After all, shared understanding of challenge and response is the natural byproduct of detailed strategic planning. To the extent the DoD thinks through and designs unique response options to the various gray zone archetypes, it will be closer to narrowing the yawning initiative gap that currently separates the United States and its gray zone competitors. Ultimately, a pre-approved menu of response options for CCDRs would be ideal.

Currently, the CCDRs' Theater Campaign Plans describe their vision for achieving missions assigned in the Unified Command Plan.<sup>234</sup> CCMD Theater Security Cooperation Plans outline supporting military-to-military engagements and exercises.<sup>235</sup> Finally, CCMD contingency plans allocate regional military responsibilities in the event of open crisis or conflict.<sup>236</sup> None of these plans address the kind of gray zone campaigning described herein. There are components to all of these in a coherent and focused counter-gray zone design. Further, as suggested earlier, transition between the activities chartered by each of these might be much more fluid than current systems anticipate.

This study finds the Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning (JCIC) to be a meaningful first step toward a more nimble concept of counter-gray zone operational planning.<sup>237</sup> The current approach to campaigning when combined with insufficient understanding of the character of gray zone challenges, significant high-level risk-sensitivity, and extant CCMD constraints (e.g., authorities, resources, etc.) limit both national-level and CCMD freedom of action in the gray zone. Fortunately, the JCIC adjusts the DoD's current binary peace-war approach to a more fluid model, allowing for more effective responses to the variance associated with gray zone competition and conflict.

Specific threat-focused gray zone plans of action—coordinated and, to the extent possible, integrated with the interagency—would provide civilian decision-makers a higher degree of clarity on proposed joint force actions and contingency reactions to competitor moves or changes in the environment. They could also create more CCDR decision and operating space to the extent that they include predetermined and approved CCMD actions vis-à-vis specific gray zone activities. In the case of the latter, the Secretary of Defense and President would have to accept a higher degree of risk. It would, however, be known risk with the upside being retention of the initiative and greater control over strategic outcomes.

This is certainly tricky business for CCMDs. However, persistent competition in this gray zone band of resistance demands reasonable increases in CCMD latitude.

Enhanced GCC freedom of action is likeliest to emerge from well-coordinated, risk-informed military plans inextricably linked to a widely socialized set of specific U.S. objectives. That cannot occur without persistent civil-military interaction and coordination.

Use of the concept of “global synchronizer” would also allow either the U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or more commonly CCDRs, greater freedom to call on



and target non-military instruments in response to gray zone challenges.<sup>238</sup> Developing a strategy or plan to counter or succeed against a specific trans-regional gray zone challenges (like all of those outlined in the archetypes) would benefit from assigning a GCC as the global synchronizer and providing them with increased authorities to call on military and non-military assets outside their direct control.

In short, if the United States chooses to begin operating with military forces against gray zone threats, it will require greater authority for commanders to act at the operational and theater strategic levels of decision and action. Moreover, it will need new mechanisms that expedite the process of evaluating options and approving military operations that do not fall neatly on one or the other side of the peace-war divide. Finally, it will also require high-level interagency agility to assist CCMDs to reinforce and exploit success, mitigate risk, and contend effectively with strategic surprise and shock.

In the end, military leaders ultimately need to be able to act with greater speed and purpose and their civilian leadership needs more confidence in their ability to do so without unnecessarily increasing risk. There will certainly be some increased risk of action; however, to the extent that increased CCMD activity against gray zone challenges is the product of a strategic design benefiting from extensive advanced civil-military deliberation, the risk incurred will be well-understood and accounted for well in advance.

#### **Finding 6: U.S. concepts for the design and operational employment of force and forces are not well-adapted to persistent gray zone competition and conflict.**

DoD leaders and service chiefs have a responsibility to provide ready forces in the shape and size required by CCMDs. CCMDs want agile forces that can respond to challenges across the spectrum of military conflict but are also persistently ready to prevail against purposeful high-end military adversaries. As resources dwindle, the DoD is challenged to set priorities, build and specify missions for forces, and conduct deliberate operations against any demands other than high-end warfighting and classical counterterrorism. Suggesting otherwise to the Pentagon is tantamount to advocating for unacceptably high strategic risk.

Senior defense leaders and strategists have discovered safe harbor in the comfort of planning for a rising China, a resurgent Russia, a complex Iran, and the most obvious terrorist elements spinning off Middle Eastern devolution. The first three present prospective military challenges that, under ideal circumstances, conform well to prevailing U.S. defense convention. The latter also falls neatly into the Pentagon's post-9/11 worldview.

Unfortunately, none of the challenges outlined in this report are operating against the United States and its interests inside the self-limiting confines of that same Pentagon convention. The most consequential opponents and opposing environmental forces are threading military and non-military hybrid approaches and effects together well inside the United States' decision-making cycle, crowding out meaningful U.S. responses that appear always to be a day late and dollar short. The United States has yet to "operate" against gray zone challenges with purpose, intent, and resolve. Until it does, it cedes a great deal of ground to capable gray zone actors and important gray zone forces.

## **Recommendation: Develop and employ new and adaptable concepts, capabilities, and organizational solutions to confront U.S. gray zone challenges.**

There will be a persistent demand for a variety of operational capabilities and concepts to demonstrate resolve, gain momentum, and create dilemmas for U.S. gray zone adversaries. At the operational level, this study suggests consideration of a handful of actions to improve U.S. military performance in this regard. These recommendations span operational domains, military functions, and service components. Naturally, as this study originally received its charter from within the U.S. Army, there are several specific recommendations on U.S. conventional and special operations ground forces.

The DoD could implement all of the aforementioned recommendations, and the United States might still find itself without the tools required to effectively contest gray zone actors. Therefore, in general, this study finds that joint conventional, special operations, and functional (e.g., intelligence, cyber, space, etc.) capabilities and enablers will need to provide greater persistent gray zone utility to policymakers and military leaders. In the end, CCDRs need credible capabilities (e.g., land, sea, air, space, and cyber), a variety of innovative posture and employment options, recurring purpose-driven exercises, and substantial coordinated interagency support to undertake meaningful proactive gray zone campaigns.

Specific changes in the structure, composition, or equipping of the joint force go beyond the scope of this report. However, in almost every case, the types of forces necessary to prevail in gray zone environments are already in abundant supply. Innovative organization, better or different preparation, more authorities, new employment concepts, and increased networking and autonomy will make all joint forces better instruments for effective gray zone competition.

## **GROUND AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES (SOF)**

U.S. ground forces are the linchpins in the DoD's gray zone response. Operations and operational effects on and from land or projected ashore onto land from the sea provide a persistent demonstration of U.S. commitment. All U.S. ground forces can tangibly contribute to contesting gray zone competition with forward-deployed forces and surge expeditionary capability. In some cases, this may require structural adaptation. However, in most cases, ground force contributions will be most effective when all forces – Army, Marine, and Special Operations – are more comfortable and demonstrate the capability to aggregate, disaggregate, and re-aggregate into the most appropriate and creative mission-tailored force packages.

The Army may consider experimenting with less fixed force structure solutions. For example, modular brigade combat teams (BCTs) may not be modular enough for the gray zone. Two common characteristics of gray zone challenges imply new organizational approaches. For example, if all gray zone challenges are hybrids that by definition menace defense and military convention, they may require equally disruptive hybrid organizational solutions to compete with them.

The gray zone may require much different and sometimes much smaller modular combinations of unique military capabilities. These organizations may have to be more autonomous, self-sustaining, agile, and multi-functional than current structures imply. They should be mission-tailored, purpose-built, and certified on a cyclical basis during each successive readiness cycle.

The U.S. Marine Corps provides one useful model of an agile force structure—the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF). Often constrained by strategic lift, the Marine Corps employs adaptable, mission-tailored force packages with inherent ground, air, and logistical capability to meet GCC requirements. The exact composition and size of individual units are tailororable, based on mission demands and environmental considerations.

This study found that Army forces would be essential future gray zone contenders. However, they will need greater flexibility in organizational approaches to do so. Put directly into the context of this report, one can see how each gray zone archetype may demand employment of units with very different combinations of combat, combat support, and combat service support capabilities. Thus, all U.S. ground forces—but Army forces in particular—should ruthlessly pursue new levels of modularity, autonomy, and self-sufficiency at increasingly lower echelons to make them effective tools for precision competition in gray zone environments.

This will require ground force leaders to commit to different and sometimes smaller formations that are more flexible and adaptive. These formations need the ability to rapidly reconfigure and operate—accepting, integrating, and employing functionally distinct capabilities without sacrificing readiness or warfighting capability. Finally, as a principle, ground force leaders should be prepared to lead joint deployable headquarters from brigade to corps level that seamlessly integrate multi-component, combined, and interagency capabilities to achieve a unique menu of contingency-specific missions.

SOF too will remain important fixtures in U.S. military gray zone responses. Uniquely postured for small footprint, autonomous, and distributed operations in austere environments, SOF are critical force multipliers under virtually all gray zone conditions. These very characteristics have contributed to SOF being the force of choice under myriad contingency circumstances.

However, SOF are not panaceas for all strategic problems. Their finite numbers imply new levels of cooperation and integration with general-purpose ground capabilities in order to maximize their impact. Most SOF-type missions require significant general purpose force (GPF) assistance. Further, every operation involving the employment of significant numbers of ground-based GPF involve varying degrees of SOF involvement.

This study suggests that SOF will always feature prominently in U.S. gray zone responses. However, those responses will not succeed without new-levels of SOF-GPF integration and cooperation, consistent with the concept of modularity discussed earlier. This study argues that GPF will need to become accustomed to conducting SOF-like missions—at times under SOF command and control. Likewise, SOF too will need increasingly to adapt to routinely operating in direct support and under the command and control of GPF formations and commanders.

A third area of ground force gray zone emphasis is power projection and entry. As a general principle, with increasing numbers of U.S. ground forces stationed in and



around the continental United States (CONUS), power projection and entry will be critical for credible counter gray zone concepts of operation.

Developing and refining capable joint land forces with inherent early and forcible entry capabilities that allow for rapid, distributed deployment, and employment under a variety of circumstances, afford great flexibility to U.S. commanders attempting to design coherent counter-gray campaigns. Uncertainty calls for a greater degree of flexibility than what currently exists. The joint force has begun developing or already possesses crisis response capabilities in the form of Marine Expeditionary Units, Special Purpose MAGTFs, and the U.S. Army's Global Response Force. Building on the modularity discussion, these are necessary but not sufficient for potential future demand.

Joint ground force commanders—but especially the U.S. Army—will benefit from a thorough reimagining of the potential of expeditionary forces and operations. As it applies to the gray zone, U.S. ground forces need the capability to deploy in large numbers to perform a wide range of missions: enable and support allies, partners, and sister U.S. joint forces; build foreign partner capacity; counter adversary unconventional warfare (UW) campaigns; and perform more traditional offensive and defensive operations (often against hybrid opponents). This requires examining and developing capabilities to defeat A2AD and rapidly delivering ground capabilities on short notice and limited advanced planning.

This study found UW to be a final area of unique ground force vulnerability for the United States and its partners as they assess and contend with gray zone challenges. As currently defined by American Joint military doctrine, UW is the collection of activities that enable the overthrow of a government through proxy actors in overtly denied areas.<sup>239</sup> U.S. UW vulnerability emerges in both an offensive and defense context. Offensively, UW provides U.S. decision-makers with a baseline capability for covert degradation of an adversary's control over contested territory. Defensively, Russian and Iranian UW efforts are currently presenting U.S./partners thorny challenges in Europe and the Middle East. In both instances, U.S. forces are increasingly unfamiliar with the associated ground force demands that might result.

For example, SOF UW competency has atrophied with the substantial counterinsurgency and counterterrorism demands of the last decade and a half. For their part, GPF have never been required to understand UW as a concept. Improvement is essential on both counts.

A sharper offensive UW instrument will be an important tool for pressuring active gray zone revisionist powers who themselves employ UW to aggressively undermine U.S. partners. Likewise, deep understanding of UW on the part of GPF forces will enable them to engage in defensive UW activities to generate greater resilience among the same at risk partners.<sup>240</sup> Finally, a more robust ground force UW capability that can understand, prosecute, and defend against it, employing the widest set of military and non-military tools, may require a new military competency in “political warfare.”<sup>241</sup> This specific focus would enable both conventional and SOF to grasp the underpinnings and requirements necessary for prosecuting offensive and defensive UW activities against sophisticated gray zone actors.

## AIR AND MARITIME CAPABILITIES

To make air and naval forces more capable of responding to gray zone threats, DoD leaders would be well advised to: improve U.S. overseas basing options, develop more distributed logistics support, become more joint integrated and self-sustaining, and create a more persistent and capable regional presence. The latter—persistence and presence—does not mean predictable, permanent, or fixed.

Indeed, it is the opposite. All future counter gray zone actions—especially those focused on sophisticated, high-end revisionist threats—should focus on deliberate dislocation of adversary and competitor concepts of operation or courses of action. U.S. and partner forces should present adversaries with a constantly changing operational picture against which to pace their forces and plan campaigns. This will allow U.S. and partner forces to regain the initiative, while forcing competitors to revisit assumptions, plans, and risk calculations. Doing so ultimately contributes to slowing adversary decision-making and perhaps even lowering risks of escalation or miscalculation.

There is a host of material capabilities that will improve air and naval contributions to counter gray zone activity. They are largely beyond the scope of this report. However, the study team does believe in general that any concepts or capabilities that complicate adversary decision-making and hold at persistent risk high-value competitor assets will inevitably improve the U.S. position.

## CYBER

National-level leadership and CCMDs need to have the ability to influence the cyber domain in the face of gray zone actors committed to exploiting it. This is especially true from an A2AD perspective. The United States needs to retain freedom of maneuver in cyberspace. It must be able to secure U.S. cyber activity while also limiting hostile exploitation of the cyber domain.

The study team believes recent initiatives have the DoD moving in the right direction. These include the recent recommendation by the Goldwater-Nichols Working Group to elevate U.S. Cyber Command to a unified CCMD with Title 10/Section 164 authorities. This includes force provision, advocacy for cyber capabilities, and theater security cooperation.<sup>242</sup> Additional authorities and doctrine, organizational adaptation, training, and leader development/education changes should emerge as the threat landscape becomes clearer. Any implemented changes should allow for increased U.S. military agility and tempo in the information environment.

Of particular note in the gray zone is pursuit of “*jus extra bellum*”—“states’ rights outside of war”—at the CCMD level. *Jus extra bellum* is a newly proposed legal paradigm.<sup>243</sup> Its adoption may allow for greater U.S. flexibility in operating in the cyber domain against gray zone actors. Patterned after just war theory’s *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, as well as the League of Nation’s Lotus principle, *jus extra bellum* may provide a construct for quantifying legal gray zone activity that is essential to the 21st-century defense of U.S. interests.<sup>244</sup> CCDRs should consider building in *jus extra bellum* authorities into their planning now, based on legal precedence set vis-à-vis cyberspace activities over the past decade.

## PRECISION EXERCISING AND POWER PROJECTION

The joint force needs to operationalize exercises to support U.S. efforts in the gray zone. All exercises need to support a deliberate U.S./partner commitment to operate with purpose against specific gray zone threats. U.S. planners need to place greater emphasis on exercises as tools for affecting competitor decision-making. To date and as discussed earlier in the report, current U.S. counter-moves in the gray zone appear to be reactive, episodic, and ineffective (e.g., USS *Lassen*, USAF B-52 in SCS, and U.S. Navy Patrol Craft in the Straits of Hormuz).<sup>245</sup> This is in large measure attributable to the asymmetry in U.S.-competitor risk perceptions referenced earlier.<sup>246</sup>

However, U.S. forces do have a history of conducting adversary-focused exercises in close proximity to them (e.g., Return of Forces to Germany [REFORGER]). As was true in the past, routine and recurring military operations today can demonstrate U.S. resolve in the face of gray zone competitors and competitive forces.<sup>247</sup> Further, they can effectively orient U.S. forces to and prepare them for employment in potential theaters of active military conflict. They can also increase regional partner interoperability and capability.

The reality is that flat or decreasing defense resources and expanding challenges imply new levels of precision in prioritizing and targeting the effects of joint exercises around the world. If exercises and their effects are recast as operations within a deliberate counter-gray zone campaign, it will become easier for senior defense leaders to calibrate their purpose and message.



## XII. CONCLUSION – ADAPTATION AND ACTIVISM

As it relates to contemporary gray zone challenges, the United States and its defense enterprise are victims of their own success. The persistent military advantage that largely secured U.S. global position against all consequential competition since the end of the Cold War is no longer as secure or relevant as it was over the previous 2 decades. U.S. interests and global position are materially suffering as a consequence. Without a more activist and adaptive approach to gray zone challenges, the United States hazards forfeiture of important interests.

The templates according to which American defense strategists pegged active maintenance of U.S. military dominance since 1991 are fast succumbing to the vagaries of a turbulent and transformational strategic environment. That environment persistently favors those who are less beholden to convention. In light of that, an increasingly conservative American superpower finds itself routinely outmaneuvered by those willing to exploit this trend.

Indeed, purposeful U.S. competitors pursuing meaningful revision of the extant, American-led international order are employing a host of hybrid methods to advance and secure interests that are, in many cases, contrary to those of the United States. They employ unique combinations of influence, intimidation, coercion, and aggression to incrementally crowd out effective resistance, establish local or regional advantage, and manipulate risk perceptions in their favor. So far, the United States has not come up with a coherent countervailing approach.

As this is occurring, the exercise of responsible or effective political authority by all states is increasingly eroding. Rejectionist forces and actors exploit, free-ride on, or are propelled by this trend to resist any status quo regardless of who leads it. This creates yet another wicked hybrid security challenge where different combinations of forces coalesce by chance and spin off violent threats to the United States and its partners. To date, U.S. strategists fixate on this trend's indicators—e.g., individual terrorist or insurgent groups—without recognizing the more important and strategic underlying condition.

It is important that U.S. defense strategist dispense with an outdated set of strategic assumptions about the United States, its global position, and the rules that govern the exercise of contemporary great power. In reality, the U.S. defense enterprise should rely on three new core assumptions. First, the United States and the U.S.-led status quo will encounter persistent, unmitigated resistance. Second, resistance will take the form of gray zone competition and conflict; as a consequence, the gray zone should pace defense strategy, concepts, and capabilities. Finally, the gray zone will confound U.S. defense strategists and institutions until it is normalized and more fully accounted for by the DoD.

Normalizing and accounting for the DoD's burgeoning gray zone challenge relies on it socializing two important concepts—adaptation and activism. The defense enterprise needs to adapt how it sees its gray zone challenges; how it charts strategic action against them; and how it designs, prioritizes, and undertakes that strategic action. All of these require a robust and activist response. Until now, however, the United States has favored more conservative than progressive approaches to gray zone provocations.

In short, the forces of revision and rejection are operating effectively by both design and chance against U.S. interests. Currently, the U.S. defense enterprise is not well positioned conceptually to counter it. U.S. risk in this regard cuts two ways. Action brings with it prospects of escalation and deeper engagement. Similarly, inaction harbors the potential for gradual but nonetheless disastrous loss. There are upsides to both as well. The former benefits from retention of initiative and the latter from husbanding resources and latitude. This report suggests initiative wins.

Activist U.S. defense responses to gray zone challenges will not be without cost or complication. Thus, prudence and pragmatism should guide future risk-based choices. However, Theodore Roosevelt's counsel—cited earlier in this report—is indispensable here: “In any moment of decision, the best thing you can do is the right thing, the next best thing is the wrong thing, and the worst thing you can do is nothing.”

## Appendices and Endnotes



## APPENDIX I - WORKING GROUP PARTICIPANTS

The following experts participated in one or both expert working groups. The study team is grateful for their participation. Their working group contributions do not indicate endorsement of the final report or its findings.

Office of the Chief of Staff Lieutenant Colonel Adam Ake, U.S. Army	Headquarters, North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Supreme Allied Commander – Transformation (HQ NATO-SACT) Lieutenant Colonel Aaron Bazin, U.S. Army
Marine Corps Combat Development Command Colonel James Brennan, U.S. Marine Corps	Office of the Chief of Staff Colonel Susan Bryant, U.S. Army
Harvard University Captain John Chambers, U.S. Army	Office of the Chief of Staff Major Arnel David, U.S. Army
Navy Staff, N-513 Captain Robert Hein, U.S. Navy	U.S. Army War College (USAWC) Dr. Andrew Hill, Ph.D.
RAND Dr. David Johnson, Ph.D.	USAWC Dr. Paul Kan, Ph.D.
Army Capabilities Integration Center Colonel Scott Kendrick	RAND Mr. Burgess Laird
American Enterprise Institute Mr. Phillip Lohaus	RAND Dr. Michael Mazarr, Ph.D.
Marine Corps Combat Development Command Mr. Mike Raimondo	Marine Corps Combat Development Command Mr. Cole Reyes
Office of the Secretary of Defense Mr. Russell Rumbaugh	U.S. Department of the Navy Dr. Maura Sullivan, Ph.D.
University of Pittsburgh Dr. Phil Williams, Ph.D.	Joint Staff, J-7 Future Force Development Mr. Mike Winstead



## APPENDIX II - ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

### PROJECT DIRECTOR

NATHAN FREIER is an Associate Professor of National Security Studies with the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI). He came to SSI in August 2013 after 5 years with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) where he was a senior fellow in the International Security Program. Mr. Freier joined CSIS in April 2008 after completing a 20-year career in the U.S. Army. His last military assignment was as Director of National Security Affairs at SSI. From August 2008 to July 2012, Mr. Freier also served as a visiting research professor in strategy, policy, and risk assessment at the U.S. Army War College's (USAWC) Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) under the provisions of the Intergovernmental Personnel Act. Mr. Freier is a veteran of numerous strategy development and strategic planning efforts at Headquarters (HQ), Department of the Army; the Office of the Secretary of Defense; and two senior-level military staffs in Iraq. Mr. Freier has been published widely on a range of national security issues and continues to provide expert advice to the national security and defense communities. His areas of expertise are defense strategy, military strategy and policy development, as well as strategic net and risk assessment. Mr. Freier holds master's degrees in both international relations and politics, and is a graduate of the U.S. Army's Command and General Staff College.

### CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (LTC) CHARLES R. BURNETT has a bachelor's degree in criminal justice studies from Norwich University and a master's degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College. Over his 23 years of service, he has served in command positions at the company and battalion levels with multiple deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq. LTC Burnett has also deployed in support of military operations in Central and South America as both a U.S. Army infantry officer and a civil affairs officer.

COLONEL (COL) WILLIAM J. CAIN JR. graduated from the University of Arkansas with a bachelor's degree in transportation, and was commissioned as a Transportation Corps officer in 1992. He received a master's degree in management from Webster University in 2002, and a master's degree in logistics management from Florida Institute of Technology in 2004. COL Cain Jr. has commanded at the company and battalion level in Fort Campbell, Iraq, and Kuwait. He also deployed in support of Operation NEW DAWN. He has served in several key staff positions to include the Assistant Chief of Staff Operations, 595th Transportation Brigade, Surface Deployment and Distribution Command (SDDC), where he supported the Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) surge; and as a Defense Logistics Agency distribution strategic planner supporting U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM).

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (LTC) CHRIS COMPTON is a graduate of Indiana University, Bloomington, with a bachelor's degree in journalism. He also holds a master's degree in public administration from the University of Oklahoma as well as a master's degree in strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College. LTC Compton has served over 20 years on active duty as a U.S. Army field artillery officer, holding a variety of command and staff positions. LTC Compton is a veteran of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF).

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (Lt. Col.) SEAN HANKARD holds a bachelor's degree in sociology from Trinity College and a master's degree in military studies from the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. He has served 20 years in the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) as an infantry officer and has led Marines at every level from platoon through battalion. His operational experience includes deployments in support of OIF, OEF, and most recently Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. His last assignment was as the Commanding Officer, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines and the Commander, Ground Combat Element, Special Purpose Marine Air Ground Task Force-Crisis Response (SPMAGTF-CR), USCENTCOM.

PROFESSOR ROBERT S. HUME (Colonel (COL), U.S. Army, Ret.) serves as the Professor of Leadership in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management and currently teaches resident students at the USAWC. He received his commission as an aviation officer from the U.S. Military Academy in 1985 and holds master's degrees in operations research from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1996 and in strategic studies from the USAWC in 2007. As an aviation officer, Professor Hume served in multiple operational command and staff assignments before serving as a functional operations research systems analyst. Professor Hume has served at senior HQ including the Combined Forces Command in Korea, U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), USEUCOM, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), and the Army staff in the Pentagon. His operational deployments include tours during Operation JOINT FORGE and JOINT GUARD in support of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Stabilization Force in Bosnia, and more recently during OEF where he served as the Director for Assessments NATO International Security Assistance Force HQ in Afghanistan. Professor Hume's areas of interest are strategic leadership, defense management, capability development, campaign assessment, and experiential education.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (LTC) GARY KRAMLICH is a U.S. Army infantry and operations research/systems analysis officer with a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering from the U.S. Military Academy in 1996, and a master's degree in operations research from Naval Postgraduate School in 2005. LTC Kramlich commanded a light infantry company in the 25th Infantry Division before serving two tours as the Chief of Assessments in the 82nd Airborne Division. He completed three combat tours, once to Kuwait and twice to Afghanistan.

COLONEL (COL) J. MATTHEW LISSNER has served in all three components of the Army—Active, National Guard, and Army Reserve—for over 28 years. Currently he serves as the senior Army Reserve research advisor, SSI, USAWC, at Carlisle Barracks, PA. He has held a wide variety of infantry assignments through battalion level with the 7th Infantry Division (Light), 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment-Opposing Force (OP-FOR), and the 39th Separate Infantry Brigade (Enhanced), and has held staff positions at the 77th Regional Readiness Command, TRADOC, Third U.S. Army, U.S. Joint Forces Command, I Corps, and the 99th Regional Support Command. COL Lissner's combat deployments include Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama, OIF/OEF in Kuwait, and OIF in Iraq.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (LTC) TOBY MAGSIG is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and Columbia University. A U.S. Army infantry officer, LTC Magsig has over 20 years of experience in light, heavy, airborne, air assault, and ranger formations. His deployments include Kosovo, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

COLONEL (COL) DANIEL MOUTON is a U.S. Army foreign area officer. He received a bachelor's degree from the U.S. Military Academy in 1995 and a master's degree from Princeton University in 2008. His staff assignments include a variety of positions with the 25th Infantry Division (ID), USCENTCOM, and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM). COL Mouton's leadership assignments include platoon through battalion level with the 25th ID and 82nd Airborne Division. His deployments include Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Libya.

MR. MICHAEL MUZTAFAGO holds a bachelor's degree from Excelsior College. Mr. Muztafago served on active duty for 20 years with the U.S. Army Special Forces and in special operations assignments. Subsequent to retiring from the Army in 1999, he entered directly into civil service. His civilian assignments include Chief, USEUCOM Regional Support Team with the Army's 1st Information Operations Command (Land); and Chief, Information Operations and Special Technical Operations Branch with the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Forces Strategic Command. He also served for 5 years as the Chief, Information Operations and Special Technical Operations Division for the U.S. Army Cyber Command and Second Army.

COLONEL (COL) JAMES "BROOKS" SCHULTZE is a U.S. Army engineer officer with 21 years of experience on active duty. He is a graduate of Texas A&M University with a bachelor's degree in civil engineering. He also holds two master's degrees and is a licensed professional engineer. COL Schultze has commanded at the engineer company level at Fort Stewart and the battalion level in Germany with staff experience at battalion through Army service component levels, including service in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He has deployed to Korea, Kosovo, and Afghanistan and twice to both Kuwait and Iraq.

PROFESSOR JOHN F. TROXELL is a 1974 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy; he received a master's degree in public administration from the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University in 1982, and is a 1997 graduate of the USAWC. He currently serves as the research professor of national security and military strategy, SSI, USAWC. Professor Troxell has published several book chapters and articles on national security, defense, and military affairs. In a 30-year career as a U.S. Army engineer officer, he commanded the 3rd Engineer Battalion, 24th ID at Ft. Stewart, Georgia, and served in HQ Department of the Army War Plans Division and as a force planner for the assistant secretary of defense for strategy and requirements, in the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL (LTC) DENNIS WILLE is a 1995 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy with a bachelor's degree in physical geography. Additionally, he earned a master's degree in space systems operations in 2006 from the Naval Postgraduate School. He also earned a master's degree in theater operations in 2012 from the School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth. LTC Wille served as a cavalry troop commander in the 3rd ID at Fort Stewart, GA and as a recruiting company commander located in Central Texas. LTC Wille has most recently served as a staff officer with the U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command/Army Forces Strategic Command and has participated in operational deployments to Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

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219. This and all insights on U.S.-competitor risk perceptions are inferred by the authors from hours of engagements and roundtable conversations between December 8, 2015-March 31, 2016, at various locations in the United States, Europe, and the Pacific, with defense and national security analysts and leaders.

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221. This and all insights on U.S.-competitor risk perceptions are inferred by the authors from hours of engagements and roundtable conversations between December 8, 2015-March 31, 2016, at various locations in the United States, Europe, and the Pacific, with defense and national security analysts and leaders.

222. This insight first emerged from an engagement on the study effort by the authors with the NATO-Supreme Allied Commander – Transformation (SACT) on December 7, 2015, in Norfolk, VA.

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224. This and all insights on the need for one or more strategic charters for counter-gray zone activities are inferred by the authors from hours of engagements and roundtable conversations between December 8, 2015-March 31, 2016, at various locations in the United States, Europe, and the Pacific, with defense and national security analysts and leaders.

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The [Combatant Commander] CCDR responsible for the alignment of specified planning and related activities of other CCMDs, Services, [DoD] agencies and activities, and as directed, appropriate USG departments and agencies within an established, common framework to facilitate coordinated and decentralized execution across geographic and other boundaries. The global synchronizer's role is to align and harmonize plans and recommend sequencing of actions to achieve the strategic end states and objectives of a GCP.

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**Contributing Authors**  
Charles R. Burnett  
William J. Cain, Jr.  
Christopher D. Compton  
Sean M. Hankard  
Robert S. Hume  
Gary R. Kramlich II  
J. Matthew Lissner  
Tobin A. Magsig  
Daniel E. Mouton  
Michael S. Muztafago  
James M. Schultze  
John F. Troxell  
Dennis G. Wille

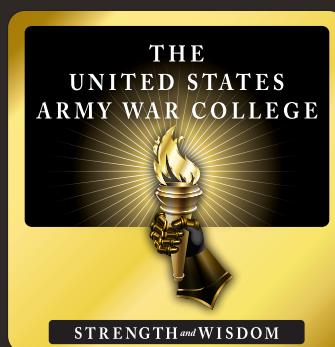
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